

The Renovation of Folktales

by Five Modern Bengali Writers

Bansari Mitra



**THE RENOVATION OF FOLK
TALES BY FIVE MODERN
BENGALI WRITERS**

BANSARI MITRA



GOLDEN JUBILEE (1945-1995)

ANTHROPOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA
Ministry of Culture
Department of Culture
27 Jawaharlal Nehru Road
Kolkata - 700 016

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FOREWORD

I am extremely happy to be associated with this book, based on work in an area that is yet to become popular in academic. The simple lucid style of presentation by the author does not belie in any way the complex shades suggested by folk tales and their renovation by modern writers. Not only are the tales nostalgic but they also point to the markers by which communities within socio-cultural matrices view the world and its inhabitants. The deftness of the recreations add new life to the ancient tales. They also infuse with colour the varied life of Bengal.

For the discipline of anthropology, folk tales is an important contributor as it highlights the not-so-overt expressions of cultures and angularities of personalities. Folk tales have scope of being dealt with at subjective levels without the rigorous trappings of objectivity. Folk tales permit a distancing from events that could be dangerous or disturbing in many ways. They also have a cathartic effect through vicarious identification with the experiences of the characters. Folk tales represent the possible range of experiences that an individual as an adult may expect to encounter and these tales through allegories and similes try to recreate the same.

The telling of folk tales plays an important role in socialization, as a medium through which tradition is handed down from one generation to the next. The stories link the ages while the alterations and renovations point to the changes.

This book will be enjoyed by those who may not have read the original stories. I am sure that this book will appeal to a variety of readers.

R.K Bhattacharya,
Director

PREFACE

I have worked in the Anthropological Survey of India during the period from 10th September, '99 to 10th August, 2000. I am grateful to the Anthropological Survey of India for providing me with a fellowship that enabled me to study the books on folklore in the immensely rich collection in the Head Office. I am very grateful to the Director, Dr. Ranjit Kumar Bhattacharya, Dr. Satyabrata Chakrabarti, Head of Office, Eastern Regional Centre and Prof. Kum Kum Bhattacharya of Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan for their constant help and support. Dr Tushar Kanti Niyogi provided guidance throughout my project. Mr. Shyamal Nandy's comments and proofreading also helped me to revise my papers. The library staff provided invaluable support by locating materials difficult to find. And lastly, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my colleagues, Subhra Dey, Ananya Bandopadhyaya, Indrani Mukhopadhyaya and Swarup Bandopadhyaya, whose constant encouragement and kindness helped to make my stay in this office a very enjoyable experience.

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CHAPTER - I

Introduction

Before we describe the project, it would be useful to define folklore as a genre. Folklore, as we know, consists of narratives, specifically tales that are passed from mouth to mouth by villagers and thus constitute a great oral tradition that really preserves the culture of a community for posterity to inherit or discover. It is the legacy of rural India that is being examined in this process of investigation, so that researchers can gain insight into the life of the people of India.

The term 'folklore' was coined by the English Antiquarian, W.J. Thomsⁱ to replace the vague term 'popular antiquities.' It is a term that has been used world wide to indicate literature that is "transmitted from individual, often directly by word or act, and sometimes indirectly"ⁱⁱ. Many folklorists are afraid that this tradition might disappear entirely through urbanisation. They have collected and published folktales and kept valuable records in library archives, so that as A.K. Ramanujan puts it, "A tale lives because it continues to be retold"ⁱⁱⁱ. It is this art of retelling that we need to examine in this study of Indian folklore. The elements of the folktale that we need to analyse are : the plot, the motifs, characters, myths and the final uses of folklore. The five authors whose works will be studied are : Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar, Abanindra Nath Tagore, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Troilakya Nath Mukherjee and Upendra Kishore Raychaudhuri.

The Plot : The plot of the fairy tale has one predictable pattern. There is a conflict between good and evil - and eventually the good characters triumph, after going through many hardships. However, in some humorous tales the good

character does not win. He is often made to look ridiculous so that his blunders become legendary and he is labelled as a fool. Or if he wins, he wins by a trick. Often, as A.K. Ramanujan has pointed out in his study *Folktales from India*, tales can be classified according to plots, such as chain tales, ritual tales, trickster tales or sibling tales^{iv}. In his collection he has grouped tales under these headings. Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar too, in his unforgettable collection called *Thakurmar Jhuli*, has grouped tales under such categories as tales of adventure, tales of demons, humorous tales and animal tales. We can see how western tales of Tom Thumb become modified in "Der Angule", where he wins the prizes in the end, but only with the aid of repulsive creatures like toads and lizards. We remember that Walt Disney's Cinderella also has a fondness for mice and frogs. We can analyse our innate repulsion/atraction for these disgusting creatures in this context. In a countryside where dangerous snakes, tigers and toads abound, it is no wonder that man, living in proximity with these creatures would spin yarns about them.

Motifs : In the folktales there are motifs, especially magical motifs that thread the plot together. These motifs can be divided into two groups : magical talismans that are life savers and other tokens that nearly kill the protagonists or render them temporarily powerless. A good example of the first type is the pomegranate fruit in "Dalim Kumar", which contains his life. Another example of the second type is the snake with the thousand heads coiled inside a fruit in the same tale. We need to see why tokens that are often similar play such powerful, though disparate roles in the story. We can also see how tales that originally took from the the west, the legend of sleeping beauty for instance, and travelled eastward, modified their main motifs in the process.

In *Thakurmar Jhuli* the story of "Golden Stick, Silver Stick" shows that these magical sticks that waken the princes or put her to sleep are obvious substitutes for the kiss of the prince that wakens Sleeping Beauty. The idea of a kiss is alien to Indian culture, so naturally this got modified, especially when it got told to children, who are not supposed to process knowledge that is reserved for adults. We can analyse motifs in fairy tales to see how they thread the plot together, and also see what location they sprang up in, so we could try to locate these tales. The tiger tales for instance, must have been told in areas close to forests, where man lived in constant terror of wild beasts. The crocodile, jackal and snake tales may have taken shape in places close to rivers as Upendra Kishore's *Tuntunir Boi* indicates.

Characters : There are usually two kinds of stock characters that we meet in tales, the protagonist and the antagonist. There are also other props - the princess who represents the prize, the helper, who may be an animal or a human being, numbers of the community or mere onlookers. The protagonist is usually a prince or a shepherded boy but there are also princesses who go forth to marry the prince. The antagonists are always witches, wizards or man-eating demons or *rakshashas*, or huge snakes and tigers. There is the predominant figure of the wicked stepmother, who is often a *rakshashi*, but she could be merely human in some tales. Thus we seen that these tales are very similar to western tales in themes of mother-hate and sibling rivalry. We encounter *rakshashis* in almost every tale of *Thakurmar Jhuli*. In the other works, the man-eaters are tigers or pythons. However, the ultimate triumph of the protagonist makes it clear that good will triumph over evil, thus revealing clearly the purpose of the folktale.

Morals : Every folktale has some moral to round it off;

as we can see, that is often the purpose of the folktale, that good will always triumph over evil in the end. If occasionally, there are variations, then one can study the reason for these variations being introduced into so traditional a genre. But since that is the purpose of the folktale, to teach the listeners a good lesson - that if you do not stray from the straight and narrow path of virtue, your rewards will be richer in the end - we need also to find out how these lessons got grafted into children's tales. The five authors listed about wanted to teach children a lesson but did they subconsciously wish to teach a lesson to the children's parents as well? This question needs to be studied in depth: folk tales are for folks, old and young alike, fairy tales, written and printed are primarily for a juvenile audience, yet they retain the character of the oral tale. So what elements for adults, besides earthy humor are preserved in tales that are ostensibly meant for children?

Myths : Many myths are revised or substituted for foreign myths as tales are modified and retold by authors. In Abanindranath's *Buro Angla*, Scandinavian legends are replaced by Hindu Puranas which are recounted effortlessly by characters like goats or ducks or spirits. The transformation of the self, from Nils to Hriday is so exciting that Vladimir Propp would have found it a fascinating topic for research. It further confirms one's opinion that tales, as they travel and change, assume a local character. The same is true of *Raj Kahini*, which is translated from Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan*. Although some events are historical, most of the stories are borrowed from hearsay. The difference that Abanindra Nath Tagore makes is by creating word-pictures out of them as he claims rather modestly in *Buro Angla*. We can in this context examine the function of the artist. Oral tales, transmitted by a legend collector became further revised

when retold by an artist who was a master story teller and painter of international repute. Thus we can explore what purpose myths serve when they are transformed, substituted or reshaped to fit into a certain scheme.

Review of Literature : Some folklore studies that have been particularly helpful and informative have been done by A.K. Ramanujan and Sankar Sengupta. They are listed below :-

Another Harmony : A.K. Ramanujan and Stuart Blackburn (ed.) Delhi : Oxford University press, 1986.

Folktales from India : A.K. Ramanujan, London : Penguin 1985.

Folklore and Folklife in India : Sankar Sengupta, Calcutta : Indian Publications, 1975.

Folklore Research in India : Sankar Sengupta, Calcutta : Asiatic Society, 1964.

The first two books explain in detail the nature of Indian folklore, the tale types, their origins and strategies adopted by collectors of folklore. The last two books are very informative regarding the history of folklore research in India. Sengupta's books tell us what development and new directions folklore research has taken in India, and how it has been enriched by help from western scholars like Vladimir Propp and Alan Dundes.

Although these books are helpful in giving us a broad perspective of Indian folklore, there are two areas where further investigation needs to be done. No comprehensive study of these five Bengali writers of fairy tales has been done so far. A comparative study of these five authors might prove to be beneficial in the sense that we can get a better idea about Bengali folklore in particular. Also, these authors

named above trace the roots of folklore to Sanskrit texts like the Puranas, Epics and the Panchatantras. We need to study the subject of Bengali folklore in its own right, independent of its sources.

Objective : I would like to examine these questions in my present work : at what stage do these tales cease to be folktales and become sophisticated stories to be told at the aristocratic circles of Calcutta? Where does the crude art of village humor become refined into works of literature? That is the question I have finally sought to answer in my study of Bengali fairy tales.

ⁱ Sankar Sengupta : *Folklore and Folklife in India* (Calcutta : Indian Publications, 1975) 37.

ⁱⁱ Ibid 25

ⁱⁱⁱ A.K. Ramanujan : *Folktales from India* (London : Penguin, 1985) 2.

^{iv} Ibid.

CHAPTER - 2

The function of some minor characters in *Thakurmar Jhuli*.

There is a well-known proverb which says that Bengalis live by rice and fish¹. As a result, fish has become an integral part of Bengali life and culture. It is used in every auspicious occasion like wedding or feast and no ceremony can be considered complete without it. Thus we see that fish is an important symbol, not only in life but the literature of Bengal as well. Who can forget the remarkable humour in one of the first Bengali prose work, *Hutom Pechar Naksha*, where a fishwife addresses a *babu* as the mustachioed guy who should buy fresh fish, while trying to palm off rotten ones? Even in the well-known *patas* of Kalighat, the image of the rotund *mechuni* with a fat fish in her hand is an icon of Bengal.

However, in literature, especially in the folk literature of Bengal, we do not find these humble folks so prominent. In the folktales, the people who crowd the pages are the kings and queens, princes and princesses. Their pomp and glitter naturally overshadow the lower classes. However, let it not be forgotten that it was those humble people who spun these stories about them.

A close reading of these stories, however, reveals that these characters are there, in an unobtrusive way and perform crucial functions in the plot. The purpose of this chapter will be to examine the function of some "minor" characters in Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar's famous collection of fairy tales, *Thakurmar Jhuli* and find out what position they occupy in the social hierarchy. They are : the maid servant in "Sheet Basanta", the peasant in "Neelkamal and Lalkamal", the gardener in "Brahman Brahmani", the smith in "Der Angule", the shepherd in "Kankanmala

"Kanchanmala", the sweeper and cowdung gatherer in "Kalaboti Rajkanya" and finally, the weaver's daughter in "Sukhu and Dukhu".ⁱⁱ

A look at these characters would reveal that they are really at the bottom rung of the social ladder. Yet, their importance in society is beyond question so crucial that one can even cite an example from *The Mahabharata*, the great work from which many myths and legends originated. As Pratibha Basu has pointed out, the second queen of Santanu is the real heroine : "...even though it is the story of the Bharatas, Satyavati and Dwaipayana are at the central point of the story".ⁱⁱⁱ She shows how the conflict between the Kuru-Pandavas was caused by Satyavati's actions in the past. Her transformation from Matsyagandha (the fish smelling one) to Satyavati causes a major upheaval in the royal house of Hastinapur. Yet, as the daughter of the fisher-king, she is almost like the untouchables. The woman who makes her way to the royal family of Kuru is the main person behind the dispute regarding inheritance. She performs a crucial function, although she belongs to the lower class. Even if her voice gets submerged in the many voices in *The Mahabharata*, her role is unforgettable.

It is not only the Epics but in the Puranas as well that fish recurs as an important symbol. Even in Markandeya Purana, as Buddhdeva Basu points out, there is a Noah like being, Baibasyat Manu, who saves humans and animals from floods with the aid of an *avatar*, a horned, mountain-like fish.^{iv} In Bengali literature also, fish becomes a recurring symbol because the fish industry, from the beginning, was so vital to its economy. In a land full of rivers and lakes and ponds, so many humans draw their sustenance from water. It is no wonder they worship river goddesses, Ganga and Padma along with their *vahanas*, crocodiles and *makaras*. Fish

helps many men to earn a livelgood because it is so important a trade in *nadimatrik* Bangladesh.

There is a fisherman even in Kalidasa's story of Sakuntala. The very title of the play, *Abhignan-Sakuntalam* points out the significance of the fisherman's action. It is true that this event is very short, but certainly not a fleeting one. It turns the whole movement of the plot backwards, when King Dushyanta recovers from amnesia and recalls his romance with Sakuntala and the ring he gave her as a token of remembrance. The sight of the ring fills him with remorse and paves the way to reconciliation.

If we examine the tale outlined above, it reads very much like a fairy tale. In fairy lore, folklore and epics, fish often swallows valuable pearls and jewels that serve as tokens. And the fisherman's action, though it takes place in a moment - he only has to fling his net into the water - serves to bring the hero and heroine together. Thus we see that his action is very crucial indeed. On the surface, his presence in the drama is marginal, yet if we read deep into the play, we see that it is vital.

And yet, we see the *Dhibara* only for a moment in the play. Compared to that, even the sad song of Hansapadika leaves a deep impression in our minds. Why is that figure of the *Dhibara* inserted into a play crowded with kings, queens, courtiers and monks? It is because the dramatist Kalidas, although a courtier, must have felt his importance in the rigidly-formed, caste-ruled society of India where every person knew his place.

We find an example of this in *Thakurmar Jhuli* as well. When the maidservant is about to cut up the three golden fish for the king's supper, they suddenly declare :

"Do not destroy us aunt! The *raja*'s brother has brought

us!". The astonished nurse ran to the *raja* with the news. Hemanto at once sent for the prince who had brought the fish. Basanto was taken to him.

Basanto said, "Brother"!

Hemanto said, "Brother"!

The brothers embraced, saying, "Because of Suorani, Duorani's sons have been apart these many years".

At these words the three golden fish transformed into three princes.

They bowed to Basanto and Hemanto and said, "Brothers, we are the three sons of Suorani. We hope that you will forgive the things that our mother did".

Then the five brothers embraced each other. (59-60)

Significantly, it is at this moment that the most important denouement in the tale takes place. The five brothers are united. Although the three little stepbrothers are quite nondescript, except for being puny and frail, they are nonetheless princes. They pay the price for their mother's wickedness, paving the axiom that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. But in the end they are delivered from bondage, just like the Duorani who becomes human again after being a parrot for a long time.

As stepbrothers, the offspring of a hated, destructive Suorani, the little princes occupy an anomalous position. They are not wicked like their mother. As puny creatures, they may have been objects of affection for Hemanto and Basanto.^v Thus, their punishment is not so great and after a little while of penance, they are restored to their former shape.

We need to find out what the fish represent. We have already seen that fish is an important symbol in art, literature,

religion and life. We notice there are two fairy tale transformations in the story. The good queen becomes a golden parrot and is kept in a cage by Prince Rupaboti. Her three stepsons, the real rivals of Hemanto and Basanto, the sons of the favourite *rani*, are turned into golden fish. They are saved from death only by their ability to speak, just like Duorani who becomes Rupaboti's favourite by her capacity to speak, advise and guide the spoilt princess about her toilet.

Talking fish, animals and parrots are not uncommon in fairy tales. Nor is the transformation of humans into animals. These fairy tale transformations are ritualistic. As we can see, it is not only the humans who become bird or fish but animals as well. The white elephant in "Sheet Basanto" is transformed into a golden lotus that Basanto can bring easily, as a gift for the princess he is going to marry, along with the gigantic pearl that she has demanded. Thus various tokens thread the story together and keep recurring in important, revealing moments.

An outstanding example of recurring motif could be the golden fish/princes. They speak and thus they save their lives; their transformation, back from fish to human again, takes place *only* at the crucial moment of reunion between Hemanto and Basanto. It is the happiest moment when all the unwanted family members like the Suorani are gone. It is Hemanto and Basanto's separation that leads to the greatest crisis in the plot. The two brothers who are everything to each other are torn asunder, first by the cruel manipulations of the stepmother and then by fate. The two motherless children had fought the world alone, keeping each other alive by love. From the moment of their separation, a series of losses begin. Indeed, the story can be divided into two halves; there are losses and separations at the beginning, matched by reunion and reconciliation at the end :

The Duorani leaves her sons and flies to a distant kingdom after being transformed into a parrot by the cruel Suorani.

Hemanto and Basanto are banished by the Suorani and the king.

Hemanto and Basanto lose sight of each other in the forest.

The king, their father, loses his kingdom after the sins of the Suorani bear fruit. He deserts her and the three remaining children.

The Suorani's three sons are swept away by the waves of the sea.

They become golden fish.

The Suorani dies.

Basanto finds the golden fish and pearl and sends them as gifts to Hemanto and Rupaboti.

The fish become human. The five brothers are united.

The Duorani becomes a human when Princess Rupaboti gives her a bath.

The Duorani embraces her two sons and three step-sons.

Princess Rupaboti and Basanto marry.

The king is reunited with his family. They all live happily everafter.

The Duorani can only become human when Rupaboti gives her a bath and removes the magical pill from her head. The princes become human when the maid servant tries to cook them for supper. Thus magical transformations are

brought about, both by major and minor characters, the princess and the maid.

If we examine the motifs listed above, of golden fish and parrot, we see that humans become animals and then turn back again into humans and that these transformations are very common in fairy tales. One is naturally tempted to ask, what is the purpose of this transformation? Humans gain many more capacities by becoming beasts, like being able to fly or speak the language of birds like the wise *bengoma* and *bengomi*, or gain secret, even forbidden knowledge. We notice that the golden parrot acts very much like the mythical pair of birds named above. She initiates the search for the magnificent pearl that finally brings her sons together. But more than that, she gains the capacity to fly and is released from a life of oppression by the Suworani. She may become Rupaboti's prisoner, but this servitude is a happier one, in many ways.

These transformations make clear to us that humans feel a natural kind of kinship with beasts, even a sense of identity. As Gopendra Krishna Basu has observed : "Man often tried to rescue himself from the grasp of wild beasts, with whom he lived in close proximity. He thus tried to appease these animals by worshipping them as gods. Which is why in the villages, the worship of tiger and crocodile gods can still be seen".^{vi} Thus humans may feel as powerful as gods when becoming tigers or jackals. The cult of worshipping jackal-headed or eagle-headed gods and goddesses was common, even in Ancient Egypt. The closeness of humans to wild beasts must have led to these legends springing up about them. But somebody who is human is always needed to liberate a character from his/her bestial form. It is Rupaboti or Hemanto's maid who does that. In "Kalavati Rajkanya" the two princesses turn Budhu and Bhutum into

Bodhkumar and Rupkumar. In general, we notice that it is often a very humble character, rather than a princess who liberates them.

This controlling of major characters by a minor character, rather like the string-pulling of the puppet master is something that can be traced even in the Epics. In *The Mahabharata*, we hear the tale of warriors, princes and gods, but they are controlled by a fisherman's daughter and her illegitimate son. Although they are hidden in the wings while the great dram is performed before our eyes, it is the story of their family that we hear.

In the same way, the unobtrusive, insignificant characters provide an impetus to the fairy tale plot to go forward. It is their signature that they put on the tale by introducing these minor characters. Thus they make it clear that they are the yarn-spinners. They are the ones who dream up these visions of rags to riches. Why then, in the story, is their presence so marginal?

At first glance, the answer seems to be simple. If the story is not about brave princes and beautiful princesses, nobody would be willing to hear it. As an academician jokingly observed. "This was their television".^{vii} In order to escape from a world of harsh, everyday reality, they spun yarns about people they would like to be, rich, famous, talented, happy and beautiful. Naturally, stories of fishwives and sweepers would not appeal to the folk imagination. Yet these folks, these yarn-spinners are present, peripherally and keep the story going.

Not only do these tales help them to escape from reality into fantasy, but to resolve inner problems of the psyche as well. They help the have-nots to dream about unattainable riches instead of ill-gotten gains. These tales also preach,

as if to a child, that if you suffer and do not stray, your rewards will be greater in the end. You shall defeat those inner and outer demons that are impediments to happiness and fulfillment.

Thus we see that the major characters, kings and queens, represent the wish-fulfilment of humble folks. However, the humble folks in the story itself also serve a purpose. It is they who set the prince and princess free, to marry, to live happily ever after. Thus the role they play is not insignificant. If the sad Duorani, who had fallen into disfavor and been transformed into a parrot, had not advised Rupaboti about her toilet, then Basanto would never have tried to obtain the Gojamoti for her. It is by inspiring so many princes to search for that magnificent pearl that the Duworani can finally bring her sons together and get them married.

It is easy to see that the Duorani is a character with whom the teller can easily identify. the Duorani, once rich, has now become poor. Life is full of hardships, of ups and downs, so it is natural for people to feel sympathy for the underdog. There is also the dream that fickle fortune would favour one at the end, no matter how slowly. In an agrarian community, where so much depends on the mercy of the weather, there are bound to be losses as well as gains, the former perhaps much greater than the latter. It is hard to keep up hope, to survive catastrophes. Thus the teller as well as the listener's pleasure consists in seeing the Duorani restored to the king's favour. There is even a picture in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, drawn by the author himself, showing how the Duorani is restored to her human form, from a powerless to powerful status. Thus, through her, the folk live the fantasy of being prosperous again. It is not only the aristocrat, fallen into disfavour, poor or defenseless who restores

harmony and peace to other characters, but a maid as well. They are in essence the ones who teach the maxim that the meek shall inherit the earth.

In other stories also, we see a similar pattern working out. In "Neelkamal and Lalkamal" for example, the peasant really witnesses an apocalyptic moment, during the rebirth of the two princes, Ajit and Kusum. This story is the most terrifying of all about demons, grouped under the category called "Roop Tarasi" or hideous forms. It has the familiar motifs like mounds of bones and rivers of blood and man-eating demons and demonesses. However, in this tale the effect of terror is heightened because the Suorani is not human, unlike the vindictive one in "Sheet Basanto" but a demoness who devours her rival and stepchild without hesitation. It is she who causes havoc in the king's household. Not only she but her wicked companions as well, come from the country of demons to cause much misery in the country. In the earlier story there is merely a brief reference to retribution, to the loss of a kingdom caused by the sins of Suorani. In this tale, however, the vision of an apocalypse makes it truly terrifying :

The next morning there were bones in every house, jungles of bones in all directions. The people who remained began to scour the countryside to find the demons.

But when they heard that Kusum and Ajit had been snatched away by a giant *rakshash* they deserted the land and fled for their lives. Only the stone raja remained in the silent palace (24).

However, the end is not just an end. It only foreshadows the beginning of a new era than witnesses the rebirth of the two princes. Always, after destruction or a holocaust, there is a new epoch and a new birth. Only through an apoca-

lyptic end can a new world spring from the ashes of the old. And when the two princes Ajit and Kusum die, a pair of new princes, Neelkamal and Lalkamal are born :

Beside the river the bamboo grove swayed in the breeze. A farmer came to cut the bamboo.

He saw a red egg and a blue egg lying between two bamboo trees. He cracked them open. Out of the red egg came a red prince, and out of the blue egg a blue prince. The farmer had fainted dead away. When he came to his senses he saw that the shell of the red egg was lined with gold and the shell of the blue egg with iron. From the gold he had bangles made for his son's wife and from the iron he had the blacksmith fashion a fine scythe (24).

This vision, this moment of rebirth is very significant. As David Craig points out :

Only in the explosion of war can redemption from control and constraint be risked : war is a kind of rebirth, the apocalyptic moment of battle when the man longs for the moment when his body armour will explode. War helps him to achieve identify with his alien, primitive, bestial interior while at the same time avoiding being devoured by it.^{viii}

Yet, who witnesses this great movement of rebirth? Not a nation but one humble peasant scared out of his wits. He even faints, as if witnessing the birth of a god. And he is immediately rewarded too, for his deed of setting the princes free. The egg-shells become gold and iron and they are for the peasant the most important metals. Gold brings wealth, iron provides the most important tool for his livelihood. He makes a scythe out of it. Thus unwittingly he achieves his dream of wealth by bringing the princes to life.

At another level, these motifs of eggs are highly sym-

bolic. A demon and demoness eat Ajit and Kusum. The most horrible act of murder is committed by the queen who devours her own son Ajit. Then these demons throw up two eggs, red and blue from which Ajit and Kusum are reborn. In resurrection myths, there are thematic links across nations. In Greek Legend, Queen Leda gives birth to an egg when seduced by Zeus in the guise of a swan. From that egg is born the most beautiful woman, a daughter of the Gods, Helen. *The Mahabarata* is also full of such stories. Satyavati is born from a fish/nymph. Here, however, as soon as the princes are born, the eggs turn into the most useful metals for the peasant so that he no longer remains poor. He is amply rewarded for performing the menial task of chopping bamboo. Thus he delivers the princes.

The two princes, once they are born, have to deliver three lands from the demons. The first is their father's kingdom, which is invaded by demons, so completely ruined that everyone flees from it. The second one is where *khoksoshes* are eating humans, one by one. Neelkamal, the son of a demone, half human, can kill them all. In the end, it is the stronghold of the demons they must visit. There they see that the land, palaces and houses are full of corpses of rotten stinking flesh. Lalkamal rightly claims : "They will destroy the world"(30). The demons must be hunted in their own lair, so that they can be completely defeated. However, it would not have been possible if the peasant had not performed his ordinary task. The world could not then be saved from total destruction.

However, all these folks do not perform tasks that deliver humans from evil. There are others who cause havoc and create problems for everybody. In fact their deeds finally lead to the test that the protagonist must pass, in order to disentangle himself from a difficult situation. Thus we see

that the tales are very varied, immensely rich, and reflect life in the villages in myriad ways. Nor are they always so straightforward and simple. In the trickster tales like "Brahman Brahmani" or "Der Angule" it is always the puny hero who, with the use of his wits manages to defeat his strong adversary. But often providence also comes to his aid.

In "Brahman Brahmani" we see an upper caste couple occupying an ambiguous position in society. They are highly respected as brahmans and should be on top of the social hierarchy. But they lack the most important thing that inspires admiration—money. The Brahman lacks money, and wit and learning as well. He is constantly nagged by his smart wife who has to endure hardships because she has married a penniless fool.

The Brahman is at last prodded into action when his wife threatens to beat him with a broom. The image of the termagant burdened with a lazy, irresponsible husband is very common in folklore. Her anger and abusive words prompt the stupid Brahman to go into the forest to learn the latter. When he becomes literate, he at last has the confidence to visit his wife and boast of his learning. He has high hopes of being a scholar in the King's court; his wishes are fulfilled in the end, but not the way he planned it.

The homecoming really thickens the plot. The Brahman foolishly boasts that he can count, and his wife mistakes it for an ability to do fortune telling. Predicting the future is a fascinating subject everywhere. It is this tale of bragging of uncanny abilities that provides entertainment for an audience. It is also the kind of trickster tale where a man, by sheer good luck, attains wealth. The audience naturally loves a success story, especially a rags to riches story.

The first test of the Brahman's ability passes easily:

He stands outside the door and counts the number of *vadas* the Brahmani has fried. But the next one causes a problem. It is one of those humbler folks, a washer man who causes this problem. His donkey is lost, so he comes to the Brahman to predict where it is. To save his face, the Brahman goes everywhere in search of the donkey but cannot find it. So he frightens off Moti the washerman, with the name of Chandi, and postpones it for a day.

Here we see there is a repetitive impulse at work. First he takes the name of Chandi, and later Jagadamba, that really saves him. Both are names of the goddess Durga. However, he cannot become successful until going through intense worry, fear and uncertainty. By accident, the donkey comes to his house and he mistakes it for a thief. In an attempt to catch it he is nearly strangled by the rope round the donkey's neck. While this is a humorous situation, some kind of moral is also being preached: if you boast about abilities that you do not posses, you may get exposed, shamed and humiliated. The Brahman narrowly escapes from punishment because he is lucky. Like many tricksters he attains wealth but his boasting could have proved to be fatal.

We need to look at the two characters who help the Brahman to become rich. One is the washerman Moti and the other is the gardener Jaga. If we look at their function in the tale, we can see in what ways their characters differ. Moti is merely a stupid, god-fearing person who establishes the Brahman's fame. He sings the praises of his supposed benefactor and does him free service. The other fellow, Jaga is a real challenge for the Brahman.

Jaga steals the princess's necklace and nobody can find it. When the Brahman appeals to the Goddess Jagadamba, Jaga overhears the appeal and thinks that he is being accused of

theft. He then begs the Brahman to save him and they make a pact. Jaga would hide the necklace in an earthen pot and bury it in a pond behind the king's palace. The Brahman would make a prediction so that the king's men would find it. Finally it is found, the Brahman is delivered and becomes an important man in court.

When we examine the above incident, it becomes clear that nobody, be he a king or a learned Brahman can benefit, except when helped by lower class people like the gardener or washerman. Sometimes the hero can merely fool a gullible person or make a pact with a guilty one, but he cannot succeed without the help of the folks who are at the lowest level of the social scale.

The next story is a Bengali version of Tom Thumb, where the puny but brave hero is even more remarkable. He befriends everyone, even repulsive creatures like toads. Often cats and ants are the helpers of princes going forth on a voyage, but here we find even lizards and snakes. It shows in what light villagers regarded them. But Der Angule has animal as well as human helpers.

Der Angule, the boy who is one and a half finger in height is an enterprising and precocious boy. He learns to speak as soon as he is born, starts to walk in no time and as soon as he learns about his father's sad fate, sets out to deliver him. We notice that he is no son of a king but that of a humble woodcutter.

It is this goal of Der Angule, setting his father free from slavery, that constitutes the plot. And we notice that the king is portrayed here negatively, far more unflatteringly than in the earlier stories. The father of Ajit and Kusum is a mere nincompoop, like Hemanto and Basanto's. In "Brahman Brahmani" the king may be threatening, but in the end

becomes benign when he rewards the Brahman. No such image of the king exists in "Der Angule". He is the one who enslaves the woodcutter, nearly kills Der Angule and breaks his promises many times. Here we see a deep feeling of hostility that resides in humble folks for the king. At one level, the king is a person that the villager admires, someone he would like to be, rich, powerful and handsome. At the same time there is resentment at the thought that the king is living off the fat of the land. In no other story does resentment against the king express itself so openly as in "Der Angule".

In this story we see that the king is evil, whereas common folks are good. Even though Der Angule is the most powerless creature imaginable, he wins by determination and persistence. He is the archetypal trickster who wins, but not without the aid of humans and animals. Initially he plays a trick on the smith, but when he gets the axe from him - the most important tool for a woodcutter—the smith becomes his friend. The little boy never betrays him. He even befriends anti-social elements like the seven thieves but punishes them when they try to harm the smith. Thus he wins through persistence and honesty and the king even renounces his kingdom to his tiny son-in-law.

The same sense of resentment and hostility can be felt in the tale of "Kankamala Kanchanmala". The shepherd and the maid betray the king and the queen, but there is initially one act of betrayal that sets the story off. The shepherd is friend of the prince who forgets friendship as soon as he becomes king. In their early friendship there was no sense of barrier between classes of rich and poor. However, once the king is ashamed to own that his friend is a shepherd his misery begins. He is pierced with needles that hurt him, like some barbaric, medieval form of torture. It is the shepherd who devises this punishment, thus getting even with his one

time friend.

However, even though the shepherd punishes the king, ruins his kingdom and brings everything to a standstill, in the end it is he who must set things right and restore the kingdom to its earlier state. And he cannot do it without punishing a woman who belongs to his class. Kankamala, who hates the Queen Kanchanmala, usurps her position by stealing her robes and jewels. The shepherd, however, can recognise her and devises an even more cruel punishment for her than the king's. He is really the master of puppets. Until he sets the king and queen free, nothing can get back into normal state. And it is he, the humble shepherd, whom the royal couple must acknowledge before they are delivered. Thus they pay off their debt, literally and symbolically. The king, penitent, even plays the flute with the shepherd sometimes, as if becoming one with him.

It is often a humble character, or a royal one reduced to a humble state like Queen Kanchanmala that can help to deliver a kingdom from evil. And often it is done when a queen or a maid; or one who is both, performs a ritual that is necessary for the purpose. Thus when Queen Kanchanmala, as Kankamala's maid, decorates the courtyard with *alpana*, she is set free from her bondage.

In "Kalavati Rajkanya" also we find two characters like Kanchanmala, who evoke the pity of the reader. The two youngest queens who give birth to an owl and monkey become a sweeper in the zoo and a cowdung gatherer. They are punished because they fail to bear the strong healthy sons craved by a king and a kingdom. From a position of wealth they are reduced to poverty, to the lowest level of humanity and become one with the humble folks.

One also notices the reason for their sudden cata-

strophic change of status. When a monk tells the king that each queen must have her fair share of the magical root he has given in order to have a healthy son, the eldest queens conspire to rob the youngest ones of their share. Thus the two young queens only eat the leftovers and fail to complete the ritual that the monk had instructed them to do. They are consequently rejected by the king. However, it should be noted that it is these two queens who ultimately perform a ritual that helps their sons to be victorious.

The five queens send their sons to the land of Princess Kolaboti in grand boats. The two humble mothers only make canoes out of betel nuts and cowrie shells. They put *durba* grass and vermillion spots on them to protect their sons from harm. Then they set them afloat saying. "We have lined the canoes with sacred *durba* grass and god will protect our sons"(9).

It is this ritual, and their blessings that really protect Buddhu and Bhutum. When the tale begins, the two queens' failure to keep the rules of ritual resulted in the disaster of their giving birth to animal sons. In the middle of the tale, their proper performance of a ritual restores their sons to the king's favour and the kingdom. The tale obviously emphasizes the need to perform rituals so that the gods would be pleased and shower gifts on humans.

In the last tale that we will examine, kings and queens and princes disappear. There is no malevolent, powerful king in "Sukhu and Dhkhu". The father who is marginally present is a weaver and he soon disappears from the tale. The tale makes visible with perfect grace, the weavers who lead a hand to mouth existence, who do not belong to the upper class, who are not even Brahmins.

Dukhu, the weaver's poor daughter achieves wealth because she is modest, industrious and gentle. But Sukhu, who is rich loses everything because she is greedy, arrogant and lazy. Dukhu always helps others, sweeps the grounds beneath the banana tree, speaks softly to the moon mother and takes the smallest gift from her. Sukhu loses all by speaking roughly, being disobedient and failing to follow the instructions of the moon mother.

While this tale serves as a cautionary one for young girls, teaching them to be good and dutiful, it is the fantasy of the moon mother that sets it apart from the other tales. Here upper class people disappear. The only one who is like a good fairy possessing magical powers is a wizened old woman who lives in the moon. Even though her place is full of silks and jewels, she does not fail to perform her task of spinning yarns at her spinning wheel. This could be a tale that belonged to the weavers who made their little insignificant world very visible by choosing a fairy tale setting, thus coming from the margin to the centre. Their moon mother is obviously a goddess who rewards industry, and does not resemble mythical gods and goddesses. In this world of weavers, the proletarians are the protagonists, and they need no rich kings to pull them up to the upper stratum of society. Dukhu, their representative, who is kind, gentle and well-mannered belongs to a class by herself.

Thus we see that in Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli*, a broad spectrum of society is presented and we meet people from all walks of life. From the fisherman to the richest king, from demons to magical, godlike beings, one can hardly match the infinite variety of Bengali fairy tales. However, one should not forget that these tales were spun by people who are the most ordinary, the ones we hardly ever notice, the 'common' folks. From these

people with a vivid and powerful imagination we inherit a legacy of extraordinary tales.

i "Mache bhate bangali".

ii I have mainly used Molly Bang's translation, entitled *The Demons of Rajpur*, (Philadelphia : Greenwillow Books, 1980) for this paper. Bang introduces a few changes, but on the whole, her translation is faithful. Most of the references to the stories are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

iii Pratibha Basu : *Mahabharater Maharanye* (Calcutta : Bikalpa Prakashani, 1997) p.23

iv Buddhadeva Basu : *Mahabharater Katha* (Calcutta : M.C. Sarkar, 1974) p.38.

v Molly Bang calls Sheet Hemanto, so I have used that name.

vi Gopendra Krishna Basu : *Banglar Loukik Debata* (Calcutta : Dey's Publishing, 1966) p.20.

vii I am grateful to Diane Christian, Professor of English, State University of New York at Buffalo, for this comment.

viii David Craig : "Psychoanalytic Sociology and the Holocaust" in *Violence, Culture and Censure*, Colin Sumner ed. (London : Taylor and Francis 1996) p.49.

CHAPTER - 3

The Portrayal of women characters in Bengali folk and fairy tales

1

Thakurmar Jhuli

Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar, in his preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* has claimed that his mother used to tell him fairy tales often; indeed in his village there was no house-wife who did not know fairy tales. He says : 'I only remember the melody of my mother's magical words'.ⁱ He claims he wrote them down as he thought he had heard them. He also tried to recover some of the forgotten tales from old women of the village and out of that frame made his "Grandma's Bag of Tales" that must appeal to young and old alike. Had he not been so zealous in preserving this rural legacy of Bengal, we would have lost these treasures long ago.

Thakurmar Jhuli, though the most famous, is not the only collection of folktales by Mitra Majumdar. He had other collections like *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, *Dadamoshayer Thole* and *Thandidir Thole*. The four listed above are collections, respectively of fairy tales, folk tales, comical tales and ritual tales. We shall study the portrayal of women in *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. The tales from *Thakurmar Jhuli* that have been chosen are Monimala, golden stick, silver stick, Kiranmala, and the Pomegranate Prince. We shall see in what way the portrayal of women characters in these tales shows us how children perceived them as well as adults who created these tales.

These tales were told by women, so one can safely assume that mostly women created these tales. Which is why women characters occupy such central positions in them, whether as young and beautiful princesses, or man-eating

demonesses, mean or spiteful hags or good-natured old women. These all reveal village women's fantasies, their dreams of becoming queens or princesses which could only be lived while sitting in the yard at night, telling these tales to sleepy children. One could also see in what way these could be regarded as cautionary tales, or ones that preach submission and docility to women. There are however, rather remarkable variations like that of Kiranmala, the one most fascinating tale about a bold and powerful princess who goes forth in the world to rescue her lost brothers and other princes, but those are indeed rare. It is for that reason that they need to be studied in more details because they oppose the concept of passive and sweet princesses.

There are quite a number of variations of the Sleeping Beauty legend that we find in Bengal. There are at least three or four versions in Mitra Majumdar's slim collections, and all of them portay princesses in a trance, so passive that they appear to be almost dead. There is of course the fantasy of reviving the dead, but the real reason why these tales keep recurring is perhaps, in a subtle way, they teach women to be passive. Like Sleeping Beauty they wait for the prince to wake them up. If we consider in the following order, the tales in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, "The Sleeping Palace", "The Pomegranate Prince", "Golden Stick Silver Stick", "Monimala" and "Kiranmala" we would see that a new kind of heroine emerges from these tales. The passive, sleeping princess enveloped in a deathlike swoon, is capable of action; she takes some responsibility for her life, and often acts on her own, even defying words of caution. She may as a result, be much chastened, so that these tales may preach one the lesson about being over-bold and venture some, but the desire to act, to take charge of one's life, to go forth into this world is no doubt there.

In the very first tale which occurs early in the collection, the sleeping princess is not only totally passive, but she is not even human in form. Only her face blooms like a lotus, in the middle of a golden bed decorated with hundreds of flowers made out of jewels. When the prince puts the golden stick on her forehead she wakes and no longer remains a flower. She gets back her hands, legs and body. The story, only very slightly developed, tells of an ancient curse of a giant that had put all the inhabitants of the palace to sleep. Naturally, when the prince, the saviour comes and wakens the sleeping princess, they are all delivered from that curse. While we see that the male figure is active and female figure is totally passive, a question comes to our minds. Why is the woman always compared to a flower, especially the lotus? Is it only because of her beauty and utter passivity, because she waits like the flower to be plucked by the prince? Or is it, because of total inaction, she is like an inanimate being, very much like the flower? At any rate, this is a princess who does absolutely nothing in the story, except bow her head in embarrassment when the prince wants to marry her.

In the next tale too, we find a princess who, when she sleeps, releases a gigantic snake from her body that can change sizes. She does not even know why, bluebeard-like, she destroys all her grooms during the wedding night. Of course she is enchanted, because Dalim Kumar's stepmother, the demoness had sent a snake to devour her stepson. That snake, though tiny as a thread when it hides in the princess' body can come out of her nostrils and become a hundred headed hydra. The tellers depicting demonesses who cast spells reveal deep-rooted fear of women, especially mothers, but even good princesses, lovely and nubile are not spared. A strand from the frame tale of *Arabian Nights* seems to have

woven itself into the pattern here, revealing in a new form fear of women's sexuality.

Nevertheless, the Pomegranate Prince kills the snake and delivers the princess and they live happily ever after. We notice that here the princess does absolutely nothing but faint. Not so in the case of "Golden Stick, Silver Stick". There we find a princess who at least acts as a prince's agent and coaxes out of her adoptive grandmother, the demoness, the important bit of information that he needs in order to triumph. So the good princes, as opposed to the active demoness who is destructive and ferocious, may be put to sleep, but she is not entirely passive. She acts, and everything, thanks to providence and her clever manipulations, goes well.

In the next tale we find a princess who, though passive in her sleep until the prince and his friend waken her, is not entirely resigned to her lot. She has been confined in the palace beneath the sea by a serpent for a long time, yet she has not lost her curiosity. Her desire to see the world outside makes her steal out when her husband, the prince falls asleep. Not only does she rise out of water to look at this wonderful world, she even desires to buy a cloth from the old woman who is lying in wait to ensnare her. Thus she is held captive by another prince and his agent, the old woman, until the clever friend of her husband sets her free. The tale may serve as a warning for women who are venturesome or bold, but still Monimala's curiosity and cupidity only strike a sympathetic chord in us. Certainly she brings disaster upon herself and the ones she loves. But even so, we feel that being confined in a serpent's place, with nothing but snakes for companions, must have been a really hard fate. The desire to break loose from chains is most human, and seems to express one of the strongest of women's desires.

In Kiranmala we find a woman who defies all conventions, who succeeds where men fail and who puts on her head a glorious crown of victory. At first she is like any other ordinary girl, who gathers flowers and weaves garlands, takes care of her adoptive father and brothers. But when her foster father dies, and her real father appears, there is a change in her. She demands a place as fine as the king's and her brothers build it for her. Then she wants, from the enchanted mountain, the golden trees with jewelled fruits and pearly streams. Her brothers go in search of those treasures and turn into stone, like a hundred other princes. When Kiran gets news of her brothers' death, she does not cry. She tends to her birds and cows, dresses up like a man, and with a sword on her side, goes boldly to bring back her brothers. She never wavers, never trembles, goes continuously in spite of numerous dangers and calamities and her heroism and bravery finally win her all these treasures that she craved. She delivers all the princes along with her brothers. When the princes greet her with a just epithet : 'O hero of seven ages!' her brothers weep and call her : "Our most blessed sister of our mother's womb". We see that gender cannot always designate roles for humans, nor deter women from giving form to their aspirations and ambitions. She is a winner who sets an example for all passive princesses, by restoring her mother to her palace, her brothers to their kingdom and gathering the severed family together. So everything ends happily, and the final impression we have is of the heroic princess with a mighty sword in hand braving dangerous mountains, storms and earthquakes, with only one clear goal in mind, that she would put her family together again. She nurtures the family and protects her loved ones from danger - a really heroic being.

Thakurdadar Jhuli

If we find a princess dressed in men's clothes, brandishing a sword and braving dangers in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, then its twin collection also has her counterpart. Pushpamala in *Thakurdadar Jhuli* is also a brave princess and saves her husband from danger many times. She is as strong as steel and belies utterly her name that suggests something beautiful, fragile and soft as the flower. She is beautiful as the flower, without a trace of weakness. With her cleverness, resolution, honesty and unwavering loyalty, she overcomes every adversity that would have annihilated any passive princess.

In this section we shall take two characters from *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, Pushpamala and Malanchamala, two heroines from whose names the stories derive their titles. Although quite different in character, these two women perform similar functions. They both bring back their dead husbands to life. Not only that, they restore to them their lost relatives and kingdoms. The first is a princess and the second one is the daughter of a Kotal, a police chief. That may also be the reason why their natures differ quite a lot, but they do seem very closely related in a way. Both marry out of their class. Both fall into danger and are saved by intervention from heaven. And both revive dead husbands.

In many ways *Thakurdadar Jhuli* differs from *Thakurmar Jhuli*. The latter unmistakably consists of fairy tales but the former is a collection of tales that resemble novellas, as the author terms them. They are more like love stories even though they have themes of magic and enchantment, gods and goddesses and miraculous recovery from death. It is the towering figure of the heroine that sets it apart from a fairy tale.

Pushpamala, even though she is arrogant and high handed as a princess, and weeps when she realises that her father has promised her to a man of inferior status, a son of Kotal, she does not fail to keep her promise. She loved Chandan from her childhood anyway, so she elopes with him. Throughout the journey she proves to be the dominant partner, far more shrewd, resourceful and strong. She saves her husband's life twice. Once, when a robber cuts off Chandan's head, she laments so loudly that she moves the Goddess Durga to pity. Thus Chandan is saved, but not for very long. A wicked *malini* turns him into a goat and after observing innumerable rites, fasting and prayers, Pushpa finally restores her husband to his human form. Like Kiranmala, she also delivers another hundred princes, who had met with Chandan's fate. She learns also that her parents died because they did not keep their promise and had to do penance after a second birth. She restores them too to their kingdom and lives happily with Chandan.

The story preaches that if a woman is faithful, keeps her promises, loves her husband and observes all rituals properly, she can even make a dead husband become alive. Fear of widowhood may have lurked beneath the design of these tales, but the last impression that remains in our minds is of this bold and courageous princess who never wavers and never quails in the face of adversity. She is truly a winner because of her inner resources of strength and integrity.

The lot of Malanchamala is not so happy. Like her immediate predecessor (the tales appear in that order) she also has a deceptive name. Her name also suggests the softness and sweetness of flowers, "a garland of garden" that the name literally means. She never fails in her resolution even though the calamities she encounters are far greater than those of Pushpa.

In fact, her lot is far harder than all the heroines of *Thakurdadar Jhuli*. At the age of twelve, she is married off to an infant prince, so that she with her good fortune may ward off all the dangers that await this little much wanted boy. When her husband dies, her father-in-law treats her brutally, calling her a witch, cutting off her hands, plucking out her eyes, beheading her father and finally flinging her to the funeral pyre of the infant prince. But when all the spirits of darkness tempt her, she guards her dead husband's body until she regains her sight and hands, and her husband is restored to life. After that, she tends to him with all her strength and energy and finds through some miracle the dresses and horses fit for a prince, though both are banished from her father-in-law's kingdom. When a princess Kanchimala, wants to wed the handsome boy Chandramanik, Malancha's husband, she blesses them both. She again saves Chandramanik from danger when Kanchimala's brothers fling him into prison. She frees him, takes him back to the cruel father-in-law and never blames him for what he did to her. When he again drives her away, she only says she would be happy when he speaks sweet words to her. Her husband finally reinstates her but she always has an inferior status because she is the daughter of a *kotal* instead of a king. Nevertheless she accepts her lot happily and even makes her father come alive again.

At first glance not only can we condemn Malancha's cruel fate but her absolute lack of resentment against so many people who betrayed her. Her father marries her to a frail prince, her father-in-law mutilates her, her husband marries another woman and she gets rejected again and again. Yet she loves them all! Such lessons in humility are hardly flattering to a woman. It may evoke great anger in female readers but there is one interesting motif that somehow sets her

apart from all other heroines. The tiger and the tigress, with their numerous brood befriend her, and whenever Chandra is threatened, she unleashes the tigers' fury upon the kingdom. Though the tigress, her 'aunt' repeatedly asks for permission to eat her cruel father-in-law, she never gives it. She only makes the tigers destroy his enemies. This heroine who controls thousands of tigers, who is in fact, fortified by their strength is unique in the sense that we never find anybody quite like her in any other tale. Her power to enchant the wild beasts, to win their loyalty through her sterling qualities set her apart from others. In that she varies from Pushpamala even, though her self-sacrifice, patience and loyalty become almost intolerable for the reader after a while, particularly because her punishments are totally undeserved.

However self-sacrificing Malancha may be, in her capacity to defend her own at least she attains the status of a heroine. She in fact belongs to that class of heroines who are active, brave and loyal. Thus in the midst of many pale and passive figures, we do encounter some women who are capable of taking action and mastering their own fate, in these two collections of folk and fairy tales.

Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar : *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Calcutta : Mitra and Ghosh, 1376) 16. All references to the tales are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

CHAPTER - 4

The story of two queens : A comparative study of two tales

Rabindrnath Tagoreⁱ in one of his poems for children in *Shishu* says : *mone pare Suorani Duorani katha*. It is these tales about Suorani and Duorani that are entrancing and everybody loves to here about the triumph of the good queen over the wicked one. The magic of the fairy tale thinly disguises the tension between the child and its mother. All the hostility towards the mother and the ambivalent love-hate relationship that may cause many major traumas in the child's psyche may actually be resolved by hearing these tales.

The purpose of this paper will be to point out the difference between the tales by two modern writers, Abanindranathⁱⁱ and Rabindranath Tagore. They were closely related, as uncle and nephew and also kindred spirits, in the sense that each of them, primarily a writer or an artist, dabbled in another medium like story telling or painting, in order to give a different form to their art. As a critic has tellingly observed, the art of Abanindranath is unique, in the sense that in his hands, words become pictures and pictures become stories. It is that extra ordinary procession of well-beloved characters that we can observe, in his tale-Duorani, Suorani, the talking monkey, the prince, the princess, the goddess Shashthi, the little boys at play, the parrots and cats and fish all well-known in nursery rhymes. The two tales that have been chosen for this *Putul* lie in winding together different strands, of rhymes, rituals and pictures? That is the question that we shall seek to answer in this eassy.

The reason why these two tales have been chosen is not only because they tell almost the same tale with almost identical characters, but also because they were written by

two people closely related, both by blood and profession. One was an artist who loved to tell stories to children, and the other was a poet who was primarily a writer, also occasionally painted pictures. Rabindranath's pictures, however, have dark themes, as opposed to Abanindranath's. The latter influenced the art of Bengal at that time by introducing themes from Moghul paintings as subjects. In *Lipika*, there is no hint, no inkling of those sinister figures that seemed to haunt Rabindranath. The splendid Emperors and Begums that Abanindranath delineated in his painting are missing from this tale. There are more homely themes that enrich a child's imagination in a typical Bengali household.

Khirer Putul is one of Abanindranath's earlier works, where his style has not reached its final, chiseled form. It was his beloved Robikaka who encouraged him to write tales for children and his first tale was *Sakuntala*. Although told in his unique style, it tells the story of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, so it is not an original tale. *Khirer Putul* is one of his first original works, and though he relies on village lore, conventional fairy tales and also nursery rhymes to constitute the plot, the characters are amazingly his own, especially because of the language they speak. His power of description makes us feel that it is a series of pictures that we find in written form, a magnificent tableau indeed.

The story starts with the conventional theme of gifts for the two queens that naturally reminds one of the beauty and the beast legend. The merchant asks his three daughters what he would bring as gifts from a voyage; the two elder daughters ask for silks and jewels. The youngest, Beauty, her father's favourite, asks for a rose; it is a trivial gift but it really starts the narrative ball rolling. In his attempt to bring her the rose, the father brings her the beast instead. The beast gives her fine clothes and a lovely palace. This invokes the

jealousy of the elder sisters. At the end, the beast turns out to be a handsome prince and he marries Beauty and they live happily everafter.

Here also, in *Khirer Putul*, we notice a subtle kind of influence. One queen asks for gorgeous silks and jewels and the other asks the king for only a black faced monkey. But that apparently trivial gift Duorani gets, turns out to be a blessing. The king even forgets to buy her the present but his minister goes in search of it, and buys a monkey from a merchant's ship that comes from a magician's land. The gift only costs him a penny, but it is actually priceless. The monkey can speak, can console his adoptive mother and with his great inventive brain and clever plans restore Duorani to her husband's favour. On the other hand, the gifts the king brings for his favorite queen turn out to be useless, because the queen cannot wear them. They are, however, not totally useless in the sense that they are laid aside for the happy day when the prince's bride will wear them. When she wears them, they fit perfectly. Thus the story that began with the king's voyage gets completed; the wheel has come full circle.

Aside from the machinations of the plot, which show the influence of Indian and European fairy tales, as well as village lore and nursery rhymes and ritual tales, Abanindranath's achievement consists in showing such originality in the art of storytelling. The whole story related in such a clear, sparkling, vivid style almost resembles one long poem. Added to that is his unique power of description that makes the picture so vivid. Also, it takes a great artist to combine so many strands and so many themes from different and even opposing genres. Village lore is crude, nursery rhymes often resemble nonsense verse; the fairy tale is more sophisticated, told in educated circles and it often loses the immediacy of appeal, the charm of oral story telling. Not

only does Abanindranath bind all these strands together to form one continuous thread of story, but his capacity to tell a story, even when it is transmitted through a printed book is amazing. We never even know that we are reading it, we feel we are hearing it.

As we have observed, this is one of Abanindranath's earlier works, so he relied on known material to weave his narrative thread and give it his own form, the painter who paints "word-pictures". Accordingly, when Suorani describes her gift "as blue as the sky, as light as the wind and as clear as water" we can clearly visualise the sari she wants. And while Abanindranath takes motifs from conventional folktales like the pearl fruits that grow on emerald trees, the opulence, the enchantment and the setting described by the artist has an effect entirely different from the fantasies of wealth that villagers dreamed of, in conventional folk tales.

The story starts with a major conflict between two characters that are mentioned earlier in the tale - Duo and Suo. It is the defeat of Suorani that the story centers on. But we can see that the story is divided into two halves. One is the voyage of the king and its outcome. The other is the wedding procession to another kingdom that the monkey leads. On his way there, not only does he catch glimpses of the goddess Shashthi and her companions, *Ghumparani Mashi Pishi*, but also the enchanted country where her little boys dwell. The first part, as we shall see, deal with a more conventional folklore from the other half, though based on the oral legacy of childhood, is a more inventive and unique form.

The first part is very like any other tale that we hear, by Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar, or even any grandma of a Bengal village. Except that here we have two human

queens instead of a demoness, but as in all conflicts, the wicked queen tries to destroy her rival, with the aid of a wicked witch instead of magic or enchantment. She almost succeeds and we notice that the cause of the conflict is the age old one: the king has no son and all the rival queens are eager to produce a son so that the king might look favourably on the mother of his heir. However, this son does not exist - it is only an elaborate game of deception played by the clever monkey. Even the *Panchatantras* contain the myths of clever and foolish monkeys, but so clever is the one in *Khirer Putul* that he pulls it off, not once but several times. When Duorani nearly dies, it is the monkey who rescues her. And the wicked queen and her companion, the old *Brahmani* are punished. All this looks quite conventional. What then is unique in Abanindranath's art? This is what we need to see here.

In spite of conventional motifs and characters, the real charm of the storytelling lies not only in the intimate manner in which the story is told, but also the kind of setting that Abanindranath creates for this magic kingdom of kings and queens and enchanted monkeys. The way he describes Duorani's dilapidated hut, contrasting it with the magnificent palace of the king, creates a setting that sets it apart from all conventional tales that we have heard so far. When Duorani sits down to eat rice and fifty vegetables on a golden plate, recalling the old happy times when she was the king's beloved, we rejoice at the thought of a character's being restored to good fortune again. We also see, when the monkey goes back and forth between the two places, how stark are the contrasts between the two worlds of Duorani and Suorani.

And we see that the conflict is preserved throughout the end of the first half of the tale. The monkey first gives

the king the idea of giving those unsuitable gifts to his future daughter-in-law. Thus the conflict between the two queens that was dormant at first suddenly rises to the surface, when the king believing that Duorani is pregnant, goes forth to give this good news to Suorani, only to be rebuffed. Thus we see that bit by bit the favorite *rani* starts losing the king's love. First she throws away the gifts he brings her. Then she is rude when the king tries to give her good news, then she tries to poison her rival and gets imprisoned. Finally when the prince weds the princess and the new bride puts on the gifts meant for Suorani, she dies of jealousy. On the other hand, Duorani welcomes the king and then takes with joy the one gift he brings her. Then she is restored to her husband's favor by the false rumor that she is pregnant. Then she gives birth to a "child". Then, when a real son comes to her with the blessings of goddess Shashthi, she reigns with the king in the kingdom. It is this subtle effect that Abanindranath seeks to build in a conventional fairy tale that sets it apart from all other fairy tales.

The next part reads more like a *brata katha* of female rituals than a fairy tale. First there is the goddess Shashthi who presides over childbirth that every married and unmarried woman in the village worships. They bring the *bhog* that the goddess must have beneath the banyan tree, her ancient place of worship. Though she promotes fertility and is very important in her function as a goddess in the Bengali household; she cannot conquer hunger and thirst. Thus she steals the cream doll that the queen has made and lets her pets, the cats eat some and she eats the rest. In her behaviour she almost resembles her *vahanas*, who love to steal cream, whenever they get the chance. Thus we see that a goddess, as in many *brata kathas*, is given human attributes, and like humans, fears exposure and scandal. But it is she

who has the power to give the queen a son and to make her love him like her own. Thus the dreams of the king and queen are fulfilled and the monkey wins and the rival queen dies. But all this does not take place until the monkey completes his fantastic journey through the wonderland.

That journey through the wonderland begins almost as soon as the goddess steps out of her *than*, or place of worship. She calls her companions, *Ghumaparani Mashi Pishi*, who are well-known characters in Bengali lullabies. And at her command they almost act like the silver stick in Bengali fairy tales, putting everyone to sleep throughout the land, the teacher and his pupils, the king and his subjects, the village folks and the members of the wedding band. Only animals and the monkey of Duorani are awake. The monkey catches Shashthi in her act of stealth. Thus he gains a glimpse into an enchanted land, where there are no schools, where characters from nursery rhymes come alive, where in Kamalapuli, there are hundreds of parrots, where boys catch fish and cats accompany brides on their journey to their new homes. It is really the land of heart's desire, where fantastic things are the rule, and reality is totally suspended. This interlude ends only when the monkey gets the son for his adoptive mother.

One might wonder why this section that is quite separate from the other parts of the tale is introduced here? One answer comes readily enough. It is only when fairy tale characters like Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks make a detour into a forest that they meet the dwarfs, the wolf, the bears so that the tale can move towards an ending. Similarly, this enchanted land that the monkey wanders into, contains the prince, the desired one who will restore order to the former happy family. But one cannot help thinking that Abanindranath, who was a lover of fantasy, and loved

to give it shape in his works, found this detour the ideal setting for a full play of his fantasy.

Besides the monkey, who really plays the part of the clever manipulator in the plot, almost like a puppet master who controls all the characters at his own whim, there are four memorable characters that we find in the tale. In fact they are the main characters, the rest only appear occasionally in the story. They are the King, Suorani, Duorani and the Witch. These are the characters that we find in a more sketchy way, in Rabindranath's "Suoranir Sadh" in *Lipika*. Yet the picture Rabindranath presents there is diametrically opposed to the picture in the former tale. One might at first reading be only content with the triumph of Duorani over Suorani, except that here, her victory over her rival is subtler than that in *Khirer Putul*. The real difference lies in Rabindranath's writing a story that appears to be a replica of his nephew's story, but that is infinitely more subtle and unconventional than a modified fairy tale that deals with conventional forms.

One might ask the question why is this story so different from that of the other writer? One thing seems obvious. Rabindranath was a poet who was far more confident about his art form because, added to his great achievements as a poet, he was remarkably versatile and excelled in almost every form of literature : poetry, drama, essay, novel and short story. It was easy for him to write "Suoranir Sadh" that though in appearance resembles a short story, is actually a poem. And it is also a fairy tale. Almost all the tales in *Lipika* read that way. He also loved to write stories for children that only adults can interpret fully and discover deeper meanings in the text. *Khirer Putul* is straightforward enough. It contains no other message than the simple one that if one is good, no matter what one's trials and tribulations are, in

the end one will triumphs over evil. In "Suoranir Sadh" as in "Bimbaboti" we see that the writer's sympathy centers on the evil character, Suorani. Thus it helps us to see it from the other person's point of view and see things from a new perspective. This is only because Rabindranath had compassion for the vilified and condemned characters in fairy tales, so that he could always speak in favour of them, helping us to see them in a new light.

In "Suoranir Sadh" the queen is not even as vindictive as the stepmother of Bimbaboti/Snow White. She is jealous of Duorani and it slowly destroys her but somehow that jealousy does not take such a vitriolic form, which is why it becomes very difficult for anyone to even gauge her problem. It puzzles the king, the doctor and even the friend of Suorani, who does not function as an evil character in this tale, unlike the witch in *Khirer Putul*. She does not go in search of cobra poison for Duorani, she merely lends a sympathetic ear to Suorani's tale of woe. And it is a tale that not even she can interpret but only Suorani, after unburdening herself to the one person that does not laugh at this queen who has everything yet nothing. She is in fact somewhat like the Suorani in *Khirer Putul* who throws away her priceless gifts of silk and jewellery because they do not fit. Here also, the queen, in the midst of plenty is not happy. She first asks for a humble woman's dress, a hut and wild fruits that the king supplies very willingly, but they do not satisfy her. When the king asks her what she wants, she cannot even answer his question. She moans to be left alone, although surrounded by solicitous people like the king, the doctor and servants. Her unhappiness centers around more subtle issues, that only she can sum up at the end, in the remarkable words : "I want the sorrows of that Duorani ... her bamboo flute could play the tune, but I only carried around my golden

flute, I could not play it".ⁱ

There is however, in that conventional tale of *Khirer Putul*, a remarkable passage that really sums up the theme in "Suoranir Sadh". The King in *Khirer Putul*, although quite obtuse and insensitive, gives voice to this thought that runs throughout both tales :

At the words of the queen, tears came into the king's eyes. In the broken hut, sitting down on the torn mat, he put the little monkey in the elder queen's lap and said Maharanee, this torn mat and broken hut are hundred times better than the golden throne and palace of the younger queen. In your room there is welcome, solicitude and sweet words. Rani, I spent seven ships worth of gold to bring clothes and ornaments for the younger queen and she rejected them. For you I only brought a monkey worth a penny and you have accepted it with love.ⁱⁱ

The above passage makes it clear to us that wealth cannot make a person happy. Love and solicitude can. Similarly, when Suorani wants her own son in Rabindranath's story to bring her fruits and vegetables in a basket, she only feels embarrassed : "I sat on my golden bed, my son brought in a basket. He was sweating and angry". (633). Duorani's son, on the other hand lovingly brings those trifling things to his mother. A gift of love is never trivial. In the end, Suorani finds no love, no happiness, because the secret of happiness is not wealth but contentment.

It is the ability to rise above sorrows and hardship that renders Duorani triumphant. Her little hut is decorated with flowers and creepers and a little *alpana*. It has beauty of a homely kind, as opposed to the splendor of golden palaces. But when Suorani tries to imitate her and wants a hut like hers, she only fails. It is because the proud wife of a

wealthy king, does not fit into such surroundings. Duorani may look beautiful in a red bordered white sari and simple ornaments, but when Suorani puts on this garb, she cannot shine. For her it is only a masquerade. It is because Duorani has accepted her poverty with grace and dignity that she has risen above it. Hardships cannot break her. Even in straitened circumstances, she has made something of beauty out of very little. In this Rabindranath obviously preaches a message that is opposed to the message of the conventional fairy tale - that if you bear poverty for a while, in the end your rewards will be splendid. You shall attain fine palaces and jewels that will make you happy. In "Suoranir Sadh" the message is just the opposite : if you are poor in worldly possessions but rich in love you can be happy and vice versa. That is why it is such a modern fairy tale.

Yet, even though Rabindranath makes Duorani triumphant, he spares a thought for the unhappy Suorani who is so rich and yet has nothing. It is not only because she is someone for whom he feels sympathy; the story is recounted from her viewpoint, so we can see things from her side, really. It is not only because of Rabindrnath's compassion but perhaps also because she is not so wicked as the Suorani in *Khirer Putul* or the stepmother of Bimbaboti. She does not try to poison Duorani. The stepmother of Bimbaboti burns with the rage of a jealousy that is almost frightening. But Suorani only pines and moans, as if troubled by an unknown ailment. Thus her suffering rouses the reader's sympathy. It is true that she dispossesses her rival :

Suorani said, 'At the side of my palace with seven wings, Duorani had a palace with three wings. Then it became two, then one. Finally she left the palace altogether'(632).

There can be no doubt that it was Suorani who manoeuvred this removal of her rival. But the irony lies in the fact that though she can deprive her rival of material wealth, she cannot spiritually disposses her. Therein lies the triumph of Duorani, who neither poverty nor the loss of the king's favor can defeat. She is happy in her humble surroundings with her loving and devoted son and her beauty, shorn of ornaments and cosmetics, shines more clearly and brightly in front of the reader's eyes.

Thus we see that two writers, one primarily an artist, the other primarily a poet, recount the stories of two rival queens but while in the first story the victory is a clear cut one, the one in the second story is ambiguous, leaving the reader with divided sympathies. Thus Rabindranath makes it possible for us to read conventional fairy tales in a new way.

i Rabindranath Tagore : *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 9, 633. My translation. All references to the story are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

ii Abanindranath Tagore : *Khirer Putul*, (Calcutta : Ananda Publishers, 1977) 19. My transalation. All references to the story are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

CHAPTER - 5

Alor Phulki : A gallery of pictures

It is one's firm belief that Abanindranath Tagore was the happiest when he painted pictures, whether in words or with a brush and paint, it did not matter. While he loved painting, he also loved to do retouching - all his old disciples recall how he would add fine touches to their paintings and portraits to make them more vivid or effective, whatever suited his fancy. Likewise, when he takes up Rostand's play *Chanticleer*, and adds fine touches of his own, it becomes his very own *Alor Phulki*.

We only need to look at the sparrow's description of the roosterⁱ in order to find out what a fine artist he is, with words, as well as with the paintbrush. He uses figures that fit in exactly with the surroundings, so that they really create the atmosphere of a farmhouse, in the open countryside. The sparrow exclaims :

What is so strange about the rooster's appearance! Stick two beanstalks into a melon, some beet-leaves on the head, two cherries for eyes, two eggplants for ears and the stalks of a pineapple for a tail - and there you have the complete, live chanticleer!ⁱⁱ

So we see that Aban Thakur loved to paint word pictures. This description of the sparrow has a mocking undertone. It is Tagore's style throughout the tale. We know that he often satirises, trivialises noble and heroic sentiments - not surprisingly, since that is the tone that exists in Rostand's *Chanticleer* or Florence Yates Hanne's *The Story of Chanticleer*. But the spirit, the genius of Rostand's satire and wit, translated and created into a tale for children by Hanne is all there. The unique touch that Tagore adds to it is his own. It is his touch, his capacity to create an atmosphere

that entirely localises, in fact Indianises the whole tale that reveals his greatness. Like his model, Rostand, Tagore also had a flamboyant streak in him, he loved to be bold in his art - a not surprising characteristic, if we consider how ornate, how embellished his art is in paintings. Naturally, Rostand's wit would appeal to him, for he was witty too, and his laughter is boisterous rather than quiet. So he liked to create portraits as well as paintings, with his words and his imagery.

One can consider for example, the very passage that describes the rooster'sⁱ song. It has musical overtones and the picture takes shape in our minds in a strange way. The blue pigeon who has never seen him, describes his wake up call in the morning exactly : "The call that pierces the blue sky, a call as bright as a golden needle and as sharp, as if joining together the earth and the sky by an invisible thread" (5). Here we find a kind of flamboyant wordplay that naturally reminds us of Rostand, sunny, bold and daring. While the rooster is still invisible to us because he has not yet made an appearance, we are introduced to him through an agent who has at least heard his voice if not beheld him. In his curiosity to behold this divine being, this music maker, he makes us just as curious. But while the pigeon describes his song in apt words, the sparrow mocks him by regarding him as a dressed up figure, made of fruits and leaves. So we see that this spoofing, this undercutting is not only a trait in Rostand but in Tagore as well. He never failed to create a comic effect, very much a la Rostand as for example in the passage below :

The rooster says : I hate you sparrow because you try to dismiss all endeavour and I respect this little pink insect that is decorating the huge trunk of the tree with a silver net, all by itself.

"And I devour it instantly", exclaimed the sparrow and ate the insect (53). We see in this world of insects, birds and beasts, there is no mercy, no compassion. Yet, as the rooster says, that is all the more reason that there should be the song that hails light, that brings the tidings of heavenly joy, that lights up this dark and gloomy earth with the golden sparks of light. And all the more reason that this sunny humour of Tagore should dispel all gloom.

Alor Phulki, like Rostand's play that is divided into acts, can be divided into several parts. It is the various settings that make the scene shift from one region to another : the farm, the meadow, the salon of the Chinese hen and then the forest where the rooster goes to recuperate after feeling betrayed by his friends and comrades.

One can examine the way in which the prologue to the story begins, when hens and pigeons start talking about their hero, the rooster. The pigeon, the messenger carries abroad the tales of glory of the prince, very much like the nautch girl in another tale of Tagore, "Padmini" in *Raj Kahini* where the songs celebrate the glorious beauty of the Rajput queen; they remind us of the troubadours of Europe. At the same time, we are reminded of the folk-singers that sing from village to village in India. Indeed, sending messages by pigeons was a very common practice in ancient and medieval India. That tradition is introduced in a subtle way into this mock-heroic tale that undercuts stories of heroism and glory in battle and also contains pieces of brilliant social satire. And thus by using these images, Rostand's brilliant satiric play is Indianised by Tagore.

It is easy to borrow the plot from any tale especially folk or fairy tales and then to construct one's own story out of it, in a way that it becomes a bowdlerized version for

children and yet, has deeper meanings meant for adult readers. All stories for children are meant to preach a lesson—that if you are good no matter how many intrigues and plots are made by wicked people to defeat you, you will triumph in the end. Likewise, the rooster is the enemy of the owls because he is dawn's harbinger. Thus, the owls plan to have him killed by his own kind, the fighting cock. But the rooster, when he hears about this plot from the spy-like sparrow, goes boldly forth to meet this creature of his own kind that causes shame to all the races of fowls. He is nearly defeated, and almost dies, but providence intervenes on his behalf, when his enemy, the Hyderabadi cock, is wounded by his own weapon, the blade tied to his feet. Thus we see that the cock-fight, presenting a gripping scene of tension that keeps the reader on edge subtly preaches this message : if you are bold and honest, God is on your side, and heaven will protect you. Thus while children enjoy a suspense laden tale, they also learn a lesson.

However, in spite of the bright scenes, the songs of glory, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil, we are finally left with an impression of darkness that lurks underneath the trees, in the shades of the fields, where the owls plot against the rooster. It is as disturbing and menacing as the peace of the jungle that is filled with wild beasts, ready to devour one another in a flash. The intrigue of the owls and the thrill that even the rooster's so-called friends and associates experience when they see him about to die just creates this impression. The rooster is finally disillusioned when he sees that the Chinese hen, while lamenting this end to her elegant party, gathers around all the spectators to see this great fight. Even the wives of the Rooster, the white, black, pink and brown hens do not spare a tear for him. They would not mourn him even if he died. At this moment

the rooster faces a great disillusionment, to be followed by an even greater one later. He realises that the golden pheasant is his only friend. The other members of the farm, though not his enemies, hardly care for him. However, they turn to him for protection when the hawk comes to swoop down on them. He realises how foolish and disloyal they are, yet he protects them. By doing so he makes clear that he will never waver in his duty towards his friends, even if they betray him. There is however, one moment of renouncement, when he goes away to the forest, to be far from the politics and intrigue of this cruel and ruthless world, where there is no loyalty or integrity.

In the forest however, in spite of his idyllic happiness with the pheasant, he realises that it is not a region free from danger, bloodshed and violence. No rural retreat lasts forever. It only sustains him for a while, until he is ready to face the challenges of this everyday world again. However, before he goes back to the barn, he has to face yet another grave danger and above all, the greatest disillusionment of all, the loss of the conviction that the sun rises because of his song.

One wonders why Tagore chose this particular text of all to write a tale for children even though the original work, a play from which Tagore's work is twice removed, was not meant to be children's literature. I think the answer lies in two facts. Although Tagore had a sunny nature, was a very lovable companion to all his friends and relatives, there was a dark side to his creative genius, different from that of Rabindranath Tagore, but still, somewhat similar in the way that both revealed it in rather unexpected ways. Rabindranath Tagore showed in *Shay*, in both the sketches and the stories what we would term as absurd really pointed to the violence that lies at the core of human nature. And

Abanindranath Tagoreⁱⁱ at unexpected moments could create pictures of the burning pyre, the owls and nightly creatures that seek out their prey in silence, and the many symbols of death that keep recurring throughout his works, whether in bright images of blood or in dark images of death. In *Raj Kahini* and *Buro Angla* too, these images keep recurring. Compared to that *Khirer Putul* and *Alor Phulki* are earlier works, and certainly much sunnier. But one cannot forget that these two writers were living in an age that had witnessed wars that had caused such amazing devastation that their minds must have been haunted by these images of death. Accordingly, *Alor Phulki*, no matter how witty and full of laughter, must be prone to those moods that reveal despair and gloom on the part of the artist.

Even in the forest, where the rooster is enjoying himself with the golden pheasant at his side, and where, from time to time, the sheep dog that guards the farm visits him and keeps him updated with news from the farm, he has to face death in a strange form. His favorite bird gets caught in a net and he nearly gets shot by a huntsman. But even though the hunter misses him it does not spare the poor, invisible little thrush whose songs are poured out to the ear in the darkness, in the midst of moonlight, when midnight transforms the scene to an unearthly glory. Thus, at this almost divine moment when the rooster, acknowledging the superiority of his humble rival is suddenly transported into a world of heavenly rapture, death strikes all of a sudden. The little thrush is killed, when he suddenly sees a flash of the gun and a bullet cuts out the lovely song of the thrush, forever. Then we echo with the golden pheasant and the rooster, how cruel is man, how rapacious and destructive.

It is this key sentence in the text that although borrowed from Rostand, gives us a clue to Abanindranath's at-

titude. He did feel that man was brutal to animals and birds, rapacious and destructive where the forest, the lake or the river were concerned, destroying nature wherever they went. Thus he could not help feeling a sense of deep sympathy for all the wild birds and beasts that were destroyed by the huntsman's gun or the poacher's net. It is for their sake that he took up his pen, like Rostand and Lagerlof. These eminent writers of the nineteenth century would appeal to the imagination of a gifted writer, but it is mainly because of Tagore's fascination with birds that he took up the task of translating and transforming them.

It is also quite clear that in many ways, Tagore's love for birds stemmed from his innate desire to paint them. He loved to paint cocks especially because they were such rich subjects for painting. And when he completed his task with the paintbrush, he took up another medium, writing to give us fresh pictures of the rooster. Even the golden hen with its bright red waistcoat and its dazzling bright golden tail creates a clear picture, as much as the blue pigeon that keeps cooing and running all over the terrace, or the hidden bird of the cuckoo clock that appears at unexpected moments and vanishes. Tagore's play with words, like the bird of one's heart or the flight that fancy takes on bird's wings, really make all these absurd, impossible creatures appear even credible and convincing. And it is the caricatures too of the absurd, prancing, preening cocks and peacocks that appear to be so conceited and ridiculous, that in fact give us a clue to human vanities and absurdities that make very good entertainment. We get glimpses of all kinds of foreign and local cocks, dressed up to create an impression, that makes the rooster look ordinary and beautiful in his plainness and simplicity, free from all pretension and snobbery. However, even he has his pride, his secret vanity that he makes the sun

rise with his song. It is a vanity that he must renounce in order to become a humbler being, a fit mate for the pheasant and a well-adjusted inhabitant of the farm. Thus the story that began with vanity and pride of the rooster ends with resignation and lesson in humility taught by experience for the rooster. We also learn a lesson about coping with disappointment, disillusionment and despair. It is a hard world where we grow up, and we must shed our disguises and outfits that make us look absurd and ridiculous. *Alor Phulki* helps us to see ourselves as we really are, not those who make the sun rise or the earth revolve but as ordinary beings, without pretensions and poses. We also get glimpses of the dark side of nature, its destructiveness and harsh realities. We are only thankful that the rooster and his mate are spared the fate of the little thrush, and can finally adjust to a world of reality, no matter how bitter and sorrowful they have become as a result of their experiences.

Abanindranath loved to portray humans in other guises, whether as cocks, so arrogant in their belief that the sun rises because they sing, or so humble and invisible as the thrush that sings unconsciously, almost unaware of the sweetness of its song. Both the rooster celebrating the rise of the sun, or the thrush celebrating the silvery grandeur of moonlight, make us aware that life is wonderful in spite of all its danger and disappointments.

ⁱ For the sake of convenience, the *Kunkro* will always be referred to in the text as the rooster.

ⁱⁱ Abanindranath Tagore : *Alor Phulki* (Calcutta : Bodhi Press, 1901) 8.. My translation. All references to the text are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

CHAPTER - 6

Myths and rituals in *Buro Angla* and *Raj Kahini*

Abanindranath Tagore loved birds. He loved to paint them both on canvas and in books. As Purnendu Patri has observed "In Jibanananda and Abanindranath's texts there are many clusters of birds" ¹. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that he should adopt a tale from a popular book of his day that is about the flight of a gander across the Scandinavian regions. Selma Lagerlof was the first woman writer to win the Noble Prize. Her book, *The Adventures of Nils* while a fantastic tale, also serves as a geographical reader for children. It enjoyed great popularity during her time, but became a forgotten classic later. It may take another age, and another generation that is interested in saving the environment, to rediscover this lovely text whose message consists in telling us how life is being destroyed in this planet, especially wildlife. It tells us what we need to know about our ancient history and legacy, and how the environment can be saved if humans were not so greedy and destructive that we make this planet uninhabitable for everyone. Lagerlof's book is a useful reader. However, Tagore's version, which follows many of the events in that tale quite closely, so transforms it that it becomes an even more fascinating tale for children that has not been forgotten over time. It has had the enduring popularity of a classic tale for all Bengali children.

Tagore had this knack of improving, adding or transforming the original tale from which he borrowed his plot, to that extent that it did not become merely a creation of his own but also something peculiarly Indian as well, in fact something that belonged totally to *our* tradition. He makes it an entirely Bengali tale and even though the structure of

the tale is kept intact, he also introduces some major differences in his work. We shall seek to examine in this chapter Tagore's use of myths and rituals in *Buro Angla* and in what way he revises them.

We know that Tagore found rituals and the tales that attended them very appealing. He even wrote a book called *Banglar Brata*. He knew very well about certain practices, and methods of worshipping the gods in rural Bengal. He introduced these themes into his tale, making them very intelligible for the reader. We have no difficulty in identifying the setting as one of our own, instead of the mountains of Scandinavia, or Lapland or other such unfamiliar names. Patriⁱ observes that Tagore did not travel much, even Agra was unknown to him—the subject of so many of his paintings. He only went to Darjeeling, Orissa and some nearby places.ⁱⁱ So the land that he loved and enjoyed most during his travels, the one that is indelibly stamped in his memory, finds a ready portraiture in his book. Thus we behold, the mountain panorama taking shape before our eyes : "At the left side, icy caps brimmed over like milk foam over black mountain tops."ⁱⁱⁱ Thus we see with what a deft touch Tagore builds a picture before our eyes. He knew how to use colloquial language, sounds, nursery rhymes or even common names and familiar characters and animals to make his books come alive before our minds. However, while in *Buro Angla* and *Alor Phulki* we are not for a moment reminded of tales set in France or Sweden, it is not so in every text. In *Raj Kahini*, he does not make the text Bengali in setting. He keeps somehow the setting of Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan* intact in that story. So we should remember that it is a very special gift he makes over to us, by giving us texts that belonged to foreign lands that he could fit into our own rural settings. We will attempt to find out in what way the observation of

certain rituals that are practised in Bengal and creation myths that are outlined in the book make it both enjoyable and useful for children.

Like *Alor Phulki*, this is also a text where children are taught this useful lesson, that humans should be kind to animals. The planet belongs to all. That if a child is so naughty, that he tortures animals needlessly, he shall be punished accordingly. He would be reduced to their size so that he would be even more helpless and terrified. That he would learn how hard is the struggle for existence for wild beasts, predator and prey alike. But we see how the use of certain names appeal to us even more. Hriday is named Buro Angla, like Thumbietot in the original. He is not Nils Holgersson, but his name, meaning heart, ironically shows how heartless he is because he enjoys the animals' sufferings. The leader of the flock of geese, in the original, named Akka ni Kabnikaise, is easily renamed as Chakka Nicobar, a perfectly familiar name for us. But like Mother Akka, shrewd, bold, protective of her flock, Chakka retains all the characteristics of that leader in the original tale. And although Akka's heartrending cry of appeal : "Leave some space for us in this earth", is omitted from Tagore's text, there are a hundred ways in which Tagore makes clear that we should heed this warning before it is too late.

We can examine in this context, the comic verse of the geese laughing at a typical Babu : "You don't want rain, but you want fresh bread, right/Well that just can't happen" (76). It shows us how comfortable and dull our lives are compared to that of the geese that brave wild regions and mountains, dangers on water and land, storms and mist in order to reach their destination. And how does a boy come to know about their hardships? It is only when he is reduced in size, shorn of pride and strength, but all the richer in learning to

have compassion for creatures, big and small.

It is not as if Lagerlof was original in delineating heroes reduced in size, coming down to the level of dumb animals, understanding their language, interpreting their wants and sufferings. Alice in Lewis Carroll is a notable example. But Lagerlof's Thumbietot, or Tagore's Hriday are remarkable in other senses. Selma describes vividly how Nils used to torture animals, filling the nests of birds with wasps, filling the holes of rats with water and many other sadistic practices that little boys indulge in. But Tagore goes one step further, in transforming Hriday into a *yaksha*, a tiny little ghost of darkness, who symbolises all the curses, the evil born from greed, hate and uncontrollable desires. It is thus that his tale becomes so fascinating. When Hriday cannot even reach the edge of the chest where he tried to ensnare the God Ganesa, he desperately tries to think of getting back to his own size. When all the birds and beasts threaten him, they frighten the reader almost as much as the tiny protagonist : "Every house had a little cellar beneath ... down the dark stairs, in a pit they would set up a *yaksha* ... They would catch a naughty boy like you ... make a chant, and then bury the boy alive" (12-13). So we see how brutal, how horribly cruel these ancient practices were in India. These superstitions tell us how powerful are curses, retributions for evil deeds and the unhappiness of lost souls. That is the touch that is lacking in the original. Thus, with the aid of certain superstitious beliefs, Tagore not only manages to create an effect of terror but also warn little children that this would be their fate if they did not obey their elders.

When the scene shifts to Darjeeling, they are amidst constant dangers and excitements, and scenes of grandeur and breathtaking beauty as well in the great, stupendous Himalayas. It is but natural that people try to tell local leg-

ends and present their own versions of creation myths, diluted with much fun and entertainment to make it palatable for little readers. What is most appealing about these legends is that there is something so rural, as if straight from the barns and little cottages of Bengal where these stories are told, with the flavour of colloquial words that make it so much more funny for the readers.

One notices that Tagore does hesitate to borrow liberally from foreign as well as local writers. Ganesha's wrath or Shiva's dance of destruction is described in a passage borrowed from *Mangal Kavya*, but *Buro Angla*'s words are all his own. Thus the story of Sati, Shiva and Sati's father Daksha Prajapati and how his great *Yajna* was spoilt becomes both comical yet cataclysmic. Especially when Daksha is forced to wear the goat's head as a special crown of humiliation! This naturally enrages the goat who is the teacher, preaching the creation myth in such a dull, monotonous way that all his pupils fall asleep. Thus it becomes clear that little boys are bored in school, for they are taught in such an uninteresting way by the teachers, too ready with canes and rebukes. Our tiny hero introduces a new way of teaching, mixing storytelling with fun and jokes, with little poems and songs that show us how radically the curriculum could be revised to appeal to young imaginations. As an eminent personality in Santiniketan, and the nephew of Rabindranath, who worked so hard to make school-life meaningful for children, Abanindranath also must have been very much concerned with these questions.

The other, even more radically revised creation myth is that of Visva Karma and Visva Mitra. Together they set out to create the world. How Viisva Mitra makes a mess of it and how Visva Karma sets it right is not only quite comical but also very symbolic. And we feel that here Tagore although

wandering away quite a bit from the writer he took as his model, does not forget to retain some of the outstanding characteristics, even though he gives the readers of geography a new form. He shows how the shape of India really resembles the udders of a cow, a daring bold imagery that only an artist like him could suggest; until we do look at the atlas and realise its aptness. Thus we see things in a new light, like those young readers who are entertained by a tale where everything is fantastic, from the flight of a human on a gander's back. That lame gander is also the one meant for a *brata* or a ritual the one promised to the goddess Subachani. These are the local gods like Hari-Jhi, in whose place human sacrifices were made. The gander that is so dear to Buro Angla and the readers must be sacrificed to Subachani. Thus we see how meaningless, cruel and hateful are the rituals, especially when Buro Angla is threatened with the same fate. We do not know whether Abanindranath, like his model Lagerlof who set out to educate her readers, is trying to teach young Bengalis about superstitions and vain beliefs that only cause needless suffering and pain to humans and animals alike. We do not know whether that is his purpose because he does not devote much space to it, but that seems to be one of his aims.

Thus we see that his text performs multiple purposes. It entertains the reader, teaches children lessons about prevention of cruelty to animals, outlines myths for children in an easy way to follow, but above all, it performs a favorite task of Tagore. It makes the beauty of Assam and Darjeeling come alive before our eyes. The single most entertaining quality of the tale consists in presenting to us a land so varied, so fascinating in its beauty, so majestic and remote. And there is never a slow moment, because the fox chasing the geese always keeps us on edge. The tiny hero saves the gan-

der from death many times, restores the little squirrels to their mother, tricks and mocks the fox and even heals the little goose that the gander marries. However, while his flight, his careless, free existence, so full of thrills and adventures opens up a new world for us, we also know when the story is drawing to its close. When the gander mates with the little goose, and Buro Angla learns that she would soon lay eggs, he realises it is time to wind up and go home. However, there are many other stories of suffering, despair and decay that he must hear before he heads for home and it is at this point that Tagore's vision darkens. There is nothing like the easy, early carefree days. The flock approaches Assam where there is a form of rats. The tales of their battles in the past make us laugh, so comical are these '*chuos*' with their swords and shields. However, they do paint before us a picture of decay, of old glorious days gone to dust, that Tagore found fascinating, just like themes of ghosts and darkness. Especially painful is the story of Budi the cow and her old mistress who dies without seeing her children, lonely and comfortless in her old age. She is a matriarch who has been abandoned by all and dies a sad, lonely death.

As we see, when the adventure begins, the mood is sunny, the winds that blow promise a trip full of joy and fulfillment. But it is often a trick of Tagore, to turn a picture that which is sunny and beautiful into something menacing and terrible. How does he do it? Not by radically revising the picture but throughout the tale providing an undercurrent of dark themes, of flipping the coin suddenly to show the sudden, carrion mask of death. Buro Angla, at the very beginning of the tale is threatened with the fate of becoming a yaksha, or being beheaded before a local goddess, Hari Jhi. But throughout his flight, even though he experiences hardship, danger and starvation, these dark images are dis-

peled, especially when his gander dips in to steal a little sock that provides him a perfect shield from cold. Like the wild birds he mocks the tame existence of babus and pet birds leading such dull and useless lives, never exploring the mists and mountains. But the flocks scale the Kanchanjungha, fly over Assam and dip into ice-cold rivers. But when they come to the land of decay and death, their mood changes. Especially when the history of the rats is recounted. They realise that all is not fun and joy, even though, almost at this moment the gander marries the wild goose and dreams of having children, thus rendering poor Buro Angla even more lonely and unhappy. But his days of adventure and heroic feat are not over yet. There is a record among the torn leaves of their histories that a little being would come one day to deliver the rats, on a black, moonless night, by performing certain rituals.

Here we see again how important is the task of carrying out rituals that form so important a part of the design of the tale. It is only a yaksha-like being who fears nothing, who must go down the stairs into darkness, into the depths of a dungeon in order to deliver the rats, and if he fails to perform the ritual properly, all would be lost. Thus Hriday goes to the same god, Ganesa who originally transformed into a thumbietot. The rats are his *vahanas*, and they must be saved. An interesting link can be found in the plot if we examine use of rituals in the story. What in the beginning transforms Hriday into Buro Angla? His attempt to ensnare Ganesa with a fish net. Showing disrespect to god is a capital crime. Ganesa is especially angry because he is a Brahmin, and he has been enveloped in a fish net. The Brahmin's fear of getting defiled is quite comical but it spells disaster for Hriday. But when he rescues the rats by performing other rituals, his is slowly making progress

towards going back where he came from. Of course, when he braves the crows and stabs their leader, refusing to open the treasure chest, his final feat lifts the curse on him. He wakes up, jolted back into reality, but he is never the same boy he was before when the story began.

In adapting Lagerlof's tale Abanindranath not only made it his very own, but also established for us a tradition, making us aware of our legacy and heritage. It was no mean task in an age when children's literature as a genre, was in its infancy.

i Purnendu Patri : *Rupasi Banglar Dui Kabi* (Calcutta : Dey's Publishing, 1980) 20.

ii Ibid, 26.

iii Abanindranath Tagore : *Buro Angla* (Calcutta, Sygnet Press 1385), 77. My translation. All references to this work are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

Raj Kahini

Abanindranath in his *Raj Kahini* sought to revive the glories of Rajputana, that ancient mountainous kingdom in the west of India, the land of many heroes and minstrels. As in many of his texts, he borrowed liberally from his source, James Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan*. He even paraphrased some of the passages, but in some tales he merely borrowed the frame and constructed his own story out of it. Some episodes mentioned in Tod's account are exactly recorded in his tale, like Bappa's wedding with the Solanki princess, or Surajmal's exchange with Prithvi Raj in the last tale, but other incidents are all added by his own deft touch, with his own special capacity of making pictures out of them. For example, the description of Padmini, that most beautiful queen of Chitore, reflected in the mirror, with every fine detail of jewellery and costume included creates an unforgettable picture before our eyes. We never forget the final rite she performed, of that terrible Jahar Brata, when with twelve thousand Rajputnis, she jumped into the pyre to save her honor. No other ritual was described by Tagore with such power and intensity, and it leaves an indelible impression on our minds. It is the revision of myths and the use of rituals and symbols that we shall examine in this section, in Abanindranath's *Raj Kahini*.

Like *Buro Angla*, *Raj Kahini* is also full of symbols and rites that really delineate the heritage of ancient India, in a most memorable way. In some tales he borrows themes from epics, and in some he relies only on fact from Tod's account. But it is his unique touch, his own capacity to tell a story grippingly, and his eye for detail that make the work come alive. In many ways this is one of his most successful work. We never have dull moment while reading it, roaming the

Aravalli Hills, impenetrable forests, the forts of Chitore and Kailore or the desert. The tales of adventure, intrigues, romances and battles crowd the pages.

What is most remarkable about Tagore's *Raj Kahini* is that there are many rituals which are given a symbolic form that render them deeply significant. And these tales are somewhat disconnected, except for the tales of Rana Hamir, but we observe that in a subtle way the rituals thread the stories together.

As Buddhadeb Basu has observed, the sexuality in Tagore's tales for children is very muted, so children cannot figure it out but adults can decipher the meaning of certain passages.ⁱ An outstanding example of this is the passage in *Raj Kahini* : "Slowly the light of the sun dimmed, only a few red rays lit up Subhaga's head like the vermilion mark of the married woman"ⁱⁱ . We know that from this encounter between the Sun God and a woman, the hero Siladitya, the ancestor of the dynasty of Mewar was born, along with his twin sister, Gayebi. Here Tagore is obviously influenced by the episodes in *The Mahabharata*, but with the use of symbols he transforms the scene, and makes it his own very special art. Thus, when the old priest of the Sun God sees the setting sun's rays light up the face of Subhaga, he knows that this woman would be his worthy successor. To her he teaches the chant to call the god Aditya, and he dies. In the same way, the desire to tell Siladitya about his parentage forces Subhaga to utter the chant twice, thus bringing about her death, and with her, the end of a phase. The orphaned Siladitya leaves his home and becomes a great warrior. After many glorious victories, the sun of Chitore sets, only to rise again when Hamir ascends the throne and defeats his enemy, Muhammad Khilji. But his triumphant accession to the throne cannot take place before he gets the sword of Bhabani

Devi, the one that was entrusted to his great ancestor, Bappaditya. It is then that his wedding becomes so symbolic. What was merely a fact mentioned in Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan* becomes something so transformed in his hands that we are transported to a scene that promises a new beginning. Tod mentions that Hamir marries Kamaladevi, the daughter of Maldeo, but she had previously been widowedⁱⁱⁱ. Tagore only couches it in such terms that it foreshadows the new dawn of Mewar, while giving a hint of the historical fact : "The dark hall lit up with the brightness of Kamalkumari's beauty, who came with her companions to palace a lotus garland round Hamir's neck. The Rajlakshmi of Chitore has been mourning like a widow in the empty halls of the palace, and now after so many days, the Prince of Chitore came to greet her" (106). We know from his auspicious moment that Hamir's star has risen. And his Lakshmi, Kamalkumari tells him about the sword of Bappa which Hamir gets, which makes him victorious. Without getting it, he could not ascend the throne. Thus he has to brave many dangers and go to a cave and visit the priestesses of the goddess Bhavani before he can get the sword. He sees terrible dangerous rituals being performed before his eyes but he fears nothing and thrusts his hand in the fire. Thus he gets the sword and regains the throne of Mewar. Only when that ritual is completed can he sit securely on that throne.

When Chitore's sun is about to set, there is again another ritual that foretells its doom. When the three sons of Raymal, and their uncle Surajmal go to the temple of Charanidevi to see who will inherit the kingdom, the priestess judges their fate according to their seating order. She declares that Sanga, sitting on the tiger skin, will inherit the kingdom. Surajmal, kneeling on earth will get land. But the other two will only dream of riches while sitting on rags.

Thus the prediction leads to fratricidal rivalry and conflict but we see how exactly the predictions of the priestess are fulfilled. Palmistry, fortune telling are ancient arts of India, and Tagore's last tale, so tightly knit, is based on the pattern of those predictions. He tells us exactly how these predictions turn out to be true, how Jaimal and Prithvi Raj die and how Sanga becomes the next king. The greatest charm of the tale lies in the fact that we already know the ending, because of the ritual mentioned at the beginning, but nevertheless it keeps us on edge.

In Buro Angla, many rites are observed and they are mentioned sporadically throughout the tale. In *Raj Kahini* however, every tale is heavy with symbols and allusions to ancient rites of India, that really constitute the backbone of the plot. No other tale of Abanindranath succeeds so superbly as a result of ingrafting rituals, some old, some new, and some endowed with meanings by the author only, that makes *Raj Kahini* so uniquely Tagore's own. In reviving the past of Rajputana, he also handed to us its legacy of customs and rituals, observed at weddings, battles and pujas, that make us proud of our heritage.

ⁱ Buddhadeb Basu : *Sahityacharcha* (Calcutta : Dey's Publishing, 1970) 25.

ⁱⁱ Abanindranath Tagore : *Raj Kahini* (Calcutta : Ananda Publishers, 1986) 13. All references to the work are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Tod : *Annals of Rajasthan* (New Delhi : Oriental Books, 1983) 219.

CHAPTER - 7

The transformation of local and foreign fairy tales

When we think of fairy tales, we tend to visualise a grandma as a story teller, drawing little children by the fire-side or the yard, in an eastern or western country. These tales get so deeply embedded in the listener's imagination that they appeal instantly when retold in a new form, like poetry or drama. Thus it becomes easy for the writer to take over the task of the grandmother, and present a well-worn theme in a new guise. It is this revision of old themes that we shall examine, in two of Rabindranath Tagore's poems : "Sat Bhai Champa" and "Bimbaboti".

The first poem presents a well-known Bengali fairy tale that tells us about the plight of seven princes and a princess, who are killed by their evil stepmothers and are resurrected into seven *champa* flowers and a red *parul* flower. The other poem contains a story that has a wider circulation, the story of Snow White that is perhaps as universally loved as Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty. Here also a wicked stepmother kills her beautiful stepdaughter, but she is resurrected, literally from the glass coffin. The poems deal with almost the same theme, murder of innocent, beautiful stepchildren by wicked stepmothers but the similarity ends there. They have been selected here for this particular purpose : not only do they occur in exact sequence in Tagore's book of poems for children called *Shishu*, but also because of the way in which Tagore presents them. He only takes a segment of the original fairy tale and presents it in a new form, in such a radically new form that it almost revolutionises our original concept of the fairy tales and helps us to look at them in a new light, interpreting motifs, themes and characters in an entirely different way. Thus it also helps us to study the transformation of well-worn themes into new ones. These poems

that are ostensibly meant for children, are poems that adults can enjoy; not in the same way that children enjoy fairy tales, but in a way that helps us to understand the predicament of certain characters, especially the much maligned stepmother, so vilified and punished throughout the ages that it profoundly disturbs us to interpret the child's psyche, especially its ambivalent love-hate relationship towards the all-powerful, wicked, destructive mother. Snow White is the archetypal tale of mother hate, more vitriolic than Cinderella or Hansel and Gretel.

If we compare Tagore's version of "Sat Bhai Champa" with that of Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar, we could see the difference quite clearly. Tagore's fondness for *Thakurmar Jhuli* led him to write :

"There is nothing so completely our own as *Thakurmar Jhuli*. But alas, even this enchanting bag of tales was being manufactured, until recently, from Manchester's machines. Nowadays, the only option for our children seemed to be British fairy tales".

Even though Tagore complains about children's entertainment centering on foreign fairy tales, he does not hesitate to use one to write a poem for children. It is not only because he gives it a new form, but also makes it so entirely Indian that we forget it is the story of Snow White. That is the achievement of a poet who creates such transformations that we see a tale in a new dress, a tale that becomes a part of our own tradition instead of a foreign one.

As we have observed before, Tagore only takes a segment of the tale, both from Sat Bhai Champa and Snow White and presents it in his poems so that they become complete on their own, somewhat cut off from the past, and even the future. We certainly do not know whether the eight children

are finally united with their parents, or for that matter what happens to Bimbaboti after she weds the prince. The drama is centered on their progress through the whole day, and in the latter's case, what effect the mirrored image has on the anguished stepmother. That is the focus of both these poems. It is as if they take an obscure aspect of the story, highlight it and then give it such a life of its own that it becomes quite separate from the plot, from the tradition of these well-known fairy tales. A close comparison of "Sat Bhai Champa" with its original in *Thakurmar Jhuli* will reveal how this takes place.

The tale in *Thakurmar Jhuli* has all the familiar characters and motifs : credulous and foolish father, wicked, intriguing stepmothers, a persecuted queen and her children who are the victims. The only element that sets it apart from the rest of tales is the resurrection theme. The eight children, buried alive in an ash heap, spring up to be seven *champas* and one red *parul*. There are many resurrection myths in fairy tales of Bengal. Neelkamal and Lalkamal are hatched from eggs. Lakhindar's bones gain flesh and he lives after the curse of Manasa is lifted. But the seven flowers strangely remind one of some variations of the Cinderella tale where a tree springs up on Cinderella's mother's grave.ⁱⁱ In some versions, Cinderella's father goes forth on a voyage and at her request, brings her a branch from a magical tree that she plants at the spot on the garden where her mother is buried. The tree eventually drops down the silk ball-gown and glass slippers when Cinderella needs them. Likewise, the eight flowers become human and jump into their parents' arms when the spell is broken and the original happy family is reunited and the wicked stepmothers are buried alive in a heap of thorns. One notices that their punishment is remarkably similar to those of the innocent little children, even

though more gruesome. Except for this rebirth element, the story follows the usual pattern. However, in the poetic version Tagore radically revises that form.

The only poetic image we find in Mitra Majumdar's version is when the flowers start soaring into the sky and twinkle like stars. Here, the whole setting, the lush green, the deep blue sky, the birds, portray such an idyllic existence that we are not even aware of any unhappiness, any sense of suffering or hardship, on the part of these children, killed so early in childhood. In fact, the wicked stepmothers, the intrigue, the father's rejection of the sad mother of these children are things of the past. Here, essentially the children are happy except in one respect; they miss their mother, from whom they have been separated for so long. The rejecting father is completely absent, nor is there any hope of being reunited with him. Nor is there any hostility towards the stepmothers who buried them. What need is there, when they are so happy? The only flaw in their happiness is the separation from the mother. They seem to belong so completely to their natural surroundings that it would be painful to uproot them from their habitat. Where human parents have failed, nature has given them a home :

*They see the flowers in the grove
The blooming roses
The sun on the leaes,
Twinkling
Like a naughty boy,
The wind steals away
The creepers embrace each other
And the leaves sway.ⁱⁱⁱ*

However, even in their contented life there is one regret that runs like a refrain throughout the poem. They miss their sad mother : "When they remember their mother/their

hearts weep" (91). But this is a theme that runs throughout almost all the poems of *Shishu*—recovery, loss, separation, especially the loss of a mother. Tagore lost his mother early in childhood and in *Shishu* he may not have only recorded his own loss but the loss of his surviving children as well; his wife died rather early, leaving Madhurilata, Mira and Rathindranath motherless. It is the inconsolable orphan child that Tagore seeks to comfort in his collection of poems; almost all of them contain this theme but his poems are not addressed to a younger version of himself or his children alone. It is a universal child that is suffering from this loss. No wonder that the seven princes are not exempt from this loss. But they have found a good surrogate mother in their Parul Didi, who wakes them, cares for them and tells them stories at night : "Hearing Parul Didi's stories/they remember their mother" (92). One can hardly imagine a newer, more radical revision of the happy ending of a fairy tale. Which is why the poem seems to be complete in itself.

In "Bimbaboti", of course, there is more of a plot and certain events are mentioned fleetingly, helping the plot to go forward. Before we examine the turn of events in the poem (so unobtrusive is the movement of the plot that one hardly notices it) we can perhaps look at the way Tagore Indianises this very alien fairy tale.

Snow-White is given the name of Bimbaboti, an unusual name but exactly expresses one characteristic of Snow White. She is framed throughout the story. Her mother, sewing by the window wishes for a daughter with hair as black as ebony, lips red as blood, skin white as snow etc. The ebony window frame gives her this idea. Later, it is her reflection, framed in the mirror that rouses the queen's wrath. In the end, she is displayed in a glass coffin.^{iv} But here, the name Bimbaboti has an immediate appeal for the reader, be-

cause we naturally ask who is the one reflected in the mirror. Tagore answers the question early in the poem : "Bimbaboti is the daughter of the queen's predecessor/She is the loveliest one in the world". That is the only appearance she makes in the story. The rest of the poem is concentrated on one intense emotion : the queen's terrible jealousy. As Manabendranath Bandopadhyaya observes :

'Bimbaboti' clearly relates the tale of Grimm's 'Snow-White' but it is entirely Tagore's own creation because he omits all the events and portrays in an extreme form one of the most basic of human instincts--the intense jealousy of the queen which brought about her ruin and took her life."

We see how this jealousy destroys the queen, bit by bit, but the strangest feeling one has in the end is that of pity, for this unhappy woman who decks herself in bright clothes and jewels and prepares to see herself reflected in the mirror, as the fairest one of all. One feels no pity for her victim Bimbaboti, indeed, she is rather the victor instead of victim. Bimbaboti is happy not only because she is beautiful but also because she is so pure, so free from jealousy and other dark emotions. Her stepmother, on the other hand, is so torn apart by bitter jealousy--" Like scorpions, every vein in her body bit her"--that the first picture she presents of a woman, about to celebrate her beauty is completely dispelled. She beats her breast, weeps but nothing can alter the fact that she is not the loveliest anymore.

It is this focus on the queen's toilet that gives the poem a new perspective. The story is not focused on Bimbaboti but on her stepmother. Each time she changes her dress--from dark blue to pink to red to yellow, each time enhancing her sensuality, flaunting her jewellery, and using cosmetics to beautify herself, we notice the changes in her moods. At

first she is happy, confident and proud but soon she feels the pangs of jealousy. Slowly, it starts eating into her heart until her world is totally darkened and in the end, there is no happiness, no smile on her face but the look of intense agony, that really breaks her heart. In fact, each day, when she decks herself in new clothes, poses before the mirror and weeps, we cannot help feeling sorry for her, even though she claims that she has tried to murder her stepdaughter thrice. In the end her madness, as it inevitably draws towards a tragic end, makes us feel sad, even though we feel that it is a punishment she deserves. The frenzy is portrayed with such an intensity and energy in the final lines of the poem that it becomes very dramatic :

*The Queen rubbed the golden mirror with sand
 But the reflection did not disappear
 Covered it with mud, did not conceal the picture
 Tried to burn it, the gold did not melt.
 With great force flung it down on the floor
 But the magic mirror did not break, she fell,
 And her heart stopped, only the diamonds
 All over her body burnt like fire.*

All her anguish keeps reiterating throughout the poem, making it clear how ghastly is that instinct of jealousy that destroys the person who feels it instead of the person who rouses it. The one thing that lives on is the lovely face of Bimbaboti, happy, beautiful and indestructible, as pure as the truth. But in our hearts we spare a sigh for the poor woman who suffered so much, through no fault of Bimbaboti.

Tagore's greatness lies in showing compassion even for those "wicked" characters in fairy tales who have so far only roused our scorn, whose destruction had in the past won our approval. In "Sat Bhai Champa" he leaves out the wicked stepmother altogether, and in "Bimbaboti" he portrays

her only. It is as if in the old tales told hundred times over, he discovers some submerged voices, waiting to be heard, and tells their stories, thus helping us to see things in a new perspective. It only proves how infinitely varied are the ways in which a story can be told, especially by a poet who has sympathy even for the characters that have been condemned throughout the ages.

i Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar : *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Calcutta : Mitra & Ghosh, 1405) 9.

ii Bruno Bettelheim : *The Uses of Enchantment : Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London : Penguin 1989)75.

iii Rabindranath Tagore : *Shishu* (Santiniketan, Visva Bharati 1920) 89. My translation. All references to the poems are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

iv Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar : *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1971) 1.

v Manabendranath Bandopadhyaya : *Rabindranath : Shishu Sahitya* (Calcutta : Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1977) 57. My translation.

CHAPTER - 8

Tiger tales of Bengal : *Kankabati* and *Tuntunir Boi*

Bengal is the land of the Royal Bengal Tiger and it is no wonder that tales of tigers abound in villages. When the writers use materials from the folklores and turn them into classic tales for children, we forget the original and only remember the new texts that emerged out of it. A writer may take local legends of Bengal and with the aid of his imagination, invent an entirely new tale out of it. Or a writer may merely adopt and retell some of the tales he heard in villages, editing them thoroughly so that the crude humor of village folk is omitted and the tale becomes palatable for urban readers, especially children. An example of the former is Troilakyanath Mukherji's *Kankabati* and of the latter, Upendra Kishore Raychaudhuri's *Tuntunir Boi*. In these collections, we encounter an almost incredible theme, the wedding of a maiden with a tiger of the forest, and while these tales are heavy with the significance of certain rites, we shall merely study the humorous side of it. We shall compare *Kankabati* with some of the tales in *Tuntunir Boi* and see in what ways they differ.

Both are humorous tales, and very rural. Both contain strong veins of satire. But Troilokyanath's work is entirely a satire and he takes refuge in fantasy to give voice to his laughter that has in fact a macabre element in it. In fact, he uses superstitious beliefs like man turning into tiger in order to have revenge on his enemies, for a satiric purpose. He shows what feelings of hate, resentment, anger and envy lurk in human hearts, how man is no better than a beast like the tiger. Halfway through the book his scene shifts to a world of fantasy where the hero Khetu, changing into a tiger, weds the heroine Kankabati. In order to ensure their ultimate wedding, desirable for all, this strange marriage between beast

and woman must take place. Thus Kankabati learns about the bestial instincts of human nature and when her education is complete, like Alice she returns to the world of reality. She then marries Khetu and except for the nightmare in which her lover had turned into a tiger, she remembers nothing.

In *Tuntunir Boi* however, the tigers are real tigers and although these are fantastic tales, somehow the cruel humor in these tales makes us feel sorry for the tiger. As for example, when a captive tiger is pierced with spears and knives and axes, he still tries to laugh, thinking he is the groom and his brothers-in-law have come to make sport with him. Or when the tiger weds a real maiden and keeps her captive, she cooks his cubs for supper and leaves. Thus we see that these tales make clear to us that humans and beasts living in proximity, somehow form unions although not happy ones. And there is also the other tiger who comes to wed the Brahmin's daughter and gets burnt alive. While we laugh at these incidents, we cannot help feeling that the tiger, which the humans fear so much is especially shamed and humiliated because through fantasy humans can revenge themselves on the tiger.

Weddings between women and beasts are not uncommon. In American Indian legends also, bears wed maidens, then become human and live happily ever after. But in Bengali tales, the conflict between humans and tigers takes a very acute form. Thus it is as if a maiden is promised to him, in order to appease the god of tigers who is often worshipped in rural Bengal. However, these tales could be used also to interpret what psychological implications lie at their basis. It may be that man, when he is transformed into a tiger, can gain strange powers and give vent to his fury in a more destructive way. Thus it is a tale in which humans

and beasts merge, in a kind of strange union where it is difficult to tell them apart.

The way in which a son-in-law is made fun of, in many folktales in India, shows how much resentment relatives bear towards the groom that demands a dowry and impoverishes a household. If he is compared to the tiger, a killer, then it is no wonder that the tiger should be killed with the curses of all the villagers on his head. Khetu, a good man who loves Kankabati and does not demand any dowry is nonetheless transformed into a tiger, thereby drawing upon his unlucky head all the grudge people bear towards a person who in a sense usurps the wealth and possessions of a household. It may be the reason why we find girls married off to tigers instead of tigresses wedding humans. Sometimes tigresses nurture male heroes it is true, so the hero can enjoy the title of "a tiger's cub" but we do not find other varieties so common. Thus we see that in folklore, whose prime purpose is to entertain, a strange thread of conflict gets in, without much of a resolution.

In these tales edited for the child-reader, full of fantasy, fun and dreams, the real sources get overshadowed. But they are unmistakably there and tell us what rural life was like in Bengal, hundreds of years ago.

CHAPTER - 9

Summary

Bengali folklore, as we have seen is an immensely rich field and when transformed by gifted writers like Rabindra Nath, Abanindra Nath, Upendra Kishor, Troilakya Nath and Dakshina Ranjan, become even more fascinating for the reader. While they entertain us with tales of enchantment and adventure, they also inform us in great depth about life in the villages, the communities in those villages and what position lower classes occupied in that kind of society. We see that tales of princes and warriors, romantic and imaginative also conceal primitive tales of rites that have been handed down from generation to generation, preserved in new guises in fairy tales that we need to see in a new light. They inform us about life in India that has continued unchanged, throughout the ages. We see that even foreign tales, when revised by master writers, help us to see characters in a new light : good characters may be perceived as static whereas evil characters, active and energetic, may actually rouse our sympathy. Thus writers continue to retell tales and revise our opinions about these tales. We may actually prefer active women characters, bold venturesome princesses, to passive, picture-like beauties. We may also see how society that is rigidly structured can under close scrutiny appear to be most oppressive and tyrannical where the lower classes are concerned. Through the interpretation of myths and symbols, especially in folktales can we finally see these "lower-class" characters as they really are : struggling, brave and attempting to resolve their

inner deep-rooted psychological conflicts regarding humans and beasts. Folklore also helps us to identify certain regions that these tales sprang up in, showing how varied and colorful life is in Bengal, or in all of India. Our rural legacies continue to inform us about many fundamental truths about life, whether through myths or folktales, or through stories rewritten by modern writers and artists, it does not matter. They express the spirit of India, its undeniable rich heritage.

APPENDIX : Gender roles and power relations in Santal folktales

Tribal folktales, like those of the Santals, often help us to examine gender roles in ancient and traditional societies. In this essay, we shall discuss four tales from P.O. Bodding's collection of Santal folktales : "Jhore and Bajun", "The Story of a Stingy Girl", "A Lazy Girl" and "Arjun and his Wife" ⁱ. In these tales, women and men often switch roles, thus redefining concepts of gender. We shall see how, through these reversals of roles, which are often comical, women are instructed about familial duties.

All these tales have one element in common; they reveal the function of a wife in a Santal household. The role of the wife is so crucial that if she does not carry out her duties of cooking and cleaning, the household would cease to function. The major themes in these tales are cooking and other household tasks and rituals. Although men are prominent characters in these tales, their primary purpose is to preach a moral to their wives about being dutiful and industrious, even if they do not succeed in all cases.

A Santal folktale often serves many purposes. It may entertain the audience, especially in order to relieve the tedium of some mechanical tasks. It may educate by preaching the usefulness of simple virtues like patience, perseverance and diligence. As a humorous tale, it may relieve the tension of day-to-day living. At another level, it may also represent wish-fulfilment, which is especially true of trickster tales. In a trickster tale, the protagonist attains wealth.

I am including four tales from Santal Folk Tales (Bodding) in an attempt to provide a contrast to tales from the mainstream discussed in the preceding sections. It may be interesting to analyse the categories and ingredients that emerge out of these stories of people marginalised in terms of their status but more importantly, distinct from other communities. The stories offer us an opportunity to glimpse into their world of perceptions.

by defeating a strong adversary, often by bragging or sheer good luck, thus emphasizing the role of chance in human life. It helps to keep hope alive, especially among folks struggling with poverty and hardships.

We notice that the function of the wife is paramount in importance in these households, and in some tales, the wife is not merely a wife but also sister-in-law, daughter or daughter-in-law. If she does not cook and serve food, all the family members would starve. If she does not sweep and clean her hut, it becomes a disgrace, an eyesore to her neighbours. The Santals' preoccupation with food, like rice, meat and vegetables shows how simple are the delights of rural life. The pleasure of eating a square meal at the end of a day's hard labour may be all that they look forward to; accordingly, the woman who provides food is crucial in her role as mistress of the household.

In the tales listed above, the wife is portrayed as either lazy or ill or otherwise incapacitated; she cannot cook, thus causing a major crisis in the household. The laziness is regarded as a sickness or possession by the devil and must be exorcised, often with the help of an '*ojha*' or medicine-man. The father-in-law in "The Lazy Girl" declares to the *ojha* : "Be quick and find and bring the medicine today or tomorrow. At the present time, great difficulty is being felt; it is not well to leave a sick person alone either. It might do, if one kept watch. But we have not enough working people. Please bring the medicine quickly and without delay" (65). The urgency of the appeal clearly shows that the lack of co-operation from this lazy girl has brought this house to a standstill.

We find a similar situation in "Jhore and Bajun" as well. Bajun, the elder brother gets married before the death of his parents. As Bodding observes : "The Santal custom is that the parents, or the responsible head of the family pro-

cure a wife for the son ... the young people concerned are just asked for their consent" (2). Since Bajun's parents are dead, and he has only one young brother Jhore, it is a small household; but even there, the role of Bajun's wife is crucial, for it is she who does the housekeeping while the two brothers do the farming. When Bajun's wife falls sick, there is nobody to provide food for the two brothers when they come home, tired after a day's work. Thus it is Jhore who is expected to carry out the tasks of his sick sister-in-law.

We notice that Jhore is thrust into a "feminine" role when he is told to cook rice and curry for his family. Bajun gives him some instructions that he misunderstands completely and as a result, botches up his work. While this causes a hilarious situation in the story, especially when Bajun comes home and finds nothing to eat, we can see how women are valued and needed, for their capacity to cook and clean up. Although the wife is sick Bajun does not resent it. His anxiety is for her to get well. He insists that she rest, so that later the household can function properly. He even massages her with oil and thinks that by leaving his task of tilling the field to Jhore, he can stay at home and cook and care for his wife till she gets back on her feet.

Jhore, however, bungles his work outside the house as well as inside. He again misunderstands his brother's instructions and lames the bullocks, thereby causing a major damage to the household economy. Having no choice, Bajun again leaves Jhore to cook rice, this time showing him how to do it. For a while, this arrangement works smoothly, but soon there is another mishap. Bajun asks Jhore to give his wife a bath in warm water, and Jhore by mistake pours hot water over her, thus killing her. From this point onwards, the situation is not comic anymore. It leads to a major rift between the brothers. Bajun tries to kill his brother, but he is tricked into believing he has done so. He then performs the

funeral rites for his wife and brother.

The way in which Jhore tricks his brother by hiding in a tree shows that he is not entirely a fool. Why then, does he bungle every task he is entrusted with? Is it merely a funny story about misunderstood instructions, common enough in the folklore of any country, showing us that if one does not follow instructions carefully, it may lead to disaster? Or is there a sub-text that emerges at second reading? Every tale may have multiple meanings; on the surface it may teach one moral, at a deeper level it may teach another. It may mean that one may function well in the role that has been assigned to one by society. Often, if a role is thrust upon one, the task may be undone.

There is also a hint of powerlessness and resentment at being the youngest member of the household in Jhore. He is definitely inferior in status to Bajun, since he neither has a wife nor manages the property. He may be resentful towards his sister-in-law who may be an inadequate surrogate mother. She is a figure of authority that he treats very badly, given the first chance. He may also resent a feminine role being thrust upon him. Nevertheless, in the end he meets his just deserts, when a tiger kills him.

In "The Story of a Stingy Girl," we have a wife who is also a daughter. Like in many humorous tales of the Santals, the laughter here is caused by a trick played upon the girl by her father. A man goes forth to another village to visit his married daughter. In his son-in-law's house, he finds himself in a strange predicament. As the father of an unmarried girl, he had unlimited power over her to admonish and instruct, and even to choose her mate. However, once he has handed her over to his son-in-law, he is no longer an authority figure for her; as her guest, he is powerless. When his stingy daughter does not give him any food, he leaves meekly, but with the resolution that he would teach her a lesson. So he gives her

some wrong instructions about cooking. His son-in-law had brought home a peacock and cut it to pieces, ready to be cooked. The father tells his daughter to cook it with *mohua* oil cake, which makes it very bitter. The girl, thinking she has cooked a savoury dish, serves it proudly to her husband and son. The dinner is ruined when they cannot eat it, and the son-in-law admonishes his wife for being stingy : "Why did you not give him anything? If you do not give a man like your own father, whom should you show hospitality to? See, because you did not give him, we have not been able to eat either. Was not all spoilt?" (57).

The husband has taken over the role of the father and teaches his wife the rules of hospitality. However, the father does not leave without having his own revenge. His method of getting even with his daughter is quite significant; he acts in an indirect, almost "feminine" manner. In other words, he manipulates his daughter. While this is humorous, it is also instructive. It teaches, on the surface, that any guest is a guest of honour. Since it is the woman who manages the household, she needs to learn this lesson well. But it also raises a question in our minds : could it be that the daughter who was once submissive, loved her father very little, and got even with him at the first chance? Could it be that one who is powerful may one day be rendered powerless?

In the other two tales, "A Lazy Girl" and "Arjun and his Wife" there are two housewives who are extremely lazy but their endings differ widely. In the former, the lazy girl is punished so that she never again strays from her path of duty; in the latter, the wife not only gets away with her laziness but wins by bragging.

The lazy wife is punished by the *ojhas* in such a way that she decides not to take the full dose of their "medicine". She is cured of her laziness very soon, when forced to parade through the village, smeared with pig's excrements and heavy

pumpkin-like vegetables, *tirra* tubers hanging from her neck, and all the little boys laughing and clapping and pointing at her. This incident provides the main entertainment in the tale. Such is her sense of shame and humiliation that the girl decides to put an end to it on the second day itself, when she was supposed to receive this treatment for three days. She learns the lesson that it is better to overcome laziness than to pay such a high price for it.

In "Arjun and his Wife" however, the wife is not only a slattern but also a boaster and a bully. She not only brags around the village that her husband can defeat an ogre but also forces him to go to the king and perform this feat. The nincompoop husband is galvanized into action, into using his wits to kill the ogre. Thus he brings home a pot of gold. His wife then justifiably claims that had it not been for her, he would never have won this fortune. She never has to labor for the rest of her days, thereby proving that sometimes laziness and boasting can be rewarded.

Thus we see that Santals offer us a rich variety of tales with many kinds of characters and morals. They entertain us a great deal. They deal with trivial, household themes but their imagination and sense of humour are very remarkable. It is for us to see that their legacy of instructive and entertaining tales does not disappear in this fast-paced, media-centered age.

¹ P.O. Bodding : *Santal Folktales*, Volume 3 (New Delhi : Gian Publishing House, 1990) 65. All references to the tales are to this edition and hereafter appear in parenthesis in the text.

